

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 9TH APRIL 2025

Minutes of the meeting of the **ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe, on **WEDNESDAY, 9TH APRIL 2025 at 7.50pm**

PRESENT

Councillor Ian Gray (Chairman) and:

Councillors: Eddy Adam, Martin Ashcroft, Lindsey Aston, Dorothy Bowman, Arun M Chandran, John Clark, Neil Collinson, George Gray, Brian Haigh, Phillip Hawkins, Andy Hill, Jed Hillary, Wendy Hillary, John Moore, Carl Robinson, Ken Robson, 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

Nine members of the public were in attendance.

77. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Peter Bergg, Sandra Haigh, Joanne Jones, Neville Jones, Sandra Kirby and Brian McAnaney.

78. MEMBERS' DISPENSATIONS

No applications for dispensations had been received.

79. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

80. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No questions were received from the members of the public.

81. MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Andy Hill, seconded by Councillor John Clark and:

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Environment Committee, held on 26th February 2025, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

82. ALLOTMENTS REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator on issues relating to the allotments for the six weeks ended the 30th March 2025.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator gave a verbal update to advise members that all vacant allotments are currently being let, and that Aycliffe Village fencing work is now complete with only some old fencing left to be removed.

In addition to the comments on avian flu from the Works and Environment Manager, during the Recreation Committee it was confirmed that there is now a housing order in effect for all birds kept on allotment sites, so all tenants have been notified, and plots have been checked to ensure tenants are obeying the order.

Councillor Jed Hillary asked if Beekeeping Plot 3a at St Oswald's Allotments can now be let. The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator explained that previously it had been suggested to split the plot into two, which wouldn't be possible. Some repairs are needed to the mesh netting and other minor repairs before it can be let.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft requested that the beekeeping repairs be carried out on the plot as soon as possible so that the plot can be let.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that the report be received.

83. ENVIRONMENT REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Works and Environment Manager on items relating to the environment for the six weeks ending the 30th March 2025.

Councillor John Moore questioned the forthcoming tree inspections, asking if these inspections can be done with a view to public safety as some trees in Woodham look to be in danger of falling. He also highlighted that the dangerous trees in North Agnew Plantation had still not been addressed by Woodham Golf Club and Durham County Council.

The Works and Environment Manager clarified that the Town Council only undertake tree surveys on the Town Council land with a focus on public safety and insurance requirements, prioritising any trees which border houses, highways or public footpaths with an emphasis on highlighting safety risks.

The Town Clerk confirmed that officers have had written confirmation from Woodham Golf Club that the works to address the dangerous trees in North Agnew Plantation will be undertaken in conjunction with Durham County Council. He offered to request an update on the timeline for this.

Councillor John Moore raised further concerns regarding blockages in Woodham Burn near the old Equestrian Centre land, suggesting that as the water level rises the burn could flood as a result of these blockages.

The Works and Environment Manager advised that this is private land, but is classed as a main waterway and managed by the Environment Agency so he will raise the issue with them.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft asked if officers have information on the locations and condition of all Town Council dog bins.

The Works and Environment Manager advised he is in the process of logging and checking all Town Council dog bins and replacing them as issues arise.

He advised that the issue of the emptying of dog bins, including those on town council land by Durham County Council has been queried by County Council officers and an update will be brought to a future meeting.

Councillor Arun M Chandran highlighted that the dog bin next to the footbridge down the path from Woodham Academy leading to the burn was overflowing, with bags on top and underneath. Durham County Council are responsible for emptying these bins and he suggested a serial number and contact telephone number be displayed on each dog bin so that the public can report it as they get full.

Councillor Andy Hill advised that he had been told by Durham County Council that litter bins may be used for dog waste and that dog bins will not be replaced.

Councillor Ken Robson confirmed that Durham County Council were phasing out the dog bins and replacing them with dual purpose bins.

Councillor Eddy Adam advised that Durham County Council were phasing out the metal dog bins and replacing them with plastic ones, but keeping them separate to litter bins.

Councillor John Moore suggested that the Council should seek to phase out dog bins and replace them with dual use bins.

The Works and Environment Manager highlighted that replacing dog bins with dual use bins may result in the Council needing to empty the bins and the costs for disposal as well as collection may be significant.

Councillor Lindsey Aston asked if the litter bin near the footbridge down the path from Woodham Academy could be moved closer to the dog bin referred to by Councillor Chandran as there are trees growing around the litter bin.

The Works and Environment Manager suggested that it may be better to do the opposite and move the dog bin next to the litter bin and trim the trees around it to make it more visible, to ensure any works vehicles can gain access easily when needed.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that the report be received.

84. CEMETERIES REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator on items relating to the cemeteries for the six weeks ended the 30th March 2025.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that the report be received.

85. WOODLAND BURIAL SITE UPDATE

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator submitted a report updating members on the results of the pre-application planning advice received from Durham County Council in relation to the proposed woodland / natural burial site on land adjacent to West Cemetery, and requested consideration of whether the Council wished to proceed with seeking planning permission, bearing in mind the significant consultancy costs that would be involved in undertaking the various plans, assessments and surveys

Councillor Jed Hillary raised concerns regarding the pre-planning report from Durham County Council and the considerable objections and barriers listed within and questioned if it is best value for the Town Council to investigate this project any further.

Councillor Jed Hillary proposed that the Council do not proceed any further with seeking planning permission for this project. Councillor Michael Stead seconded this proposal.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator agreed there are questions as to whether the project would now be financially viable, as the cost of the consultancy support equates to approximately 35 burials and this is before any spending on fencing, footpaths, tree planting etc.

He highlighted the suggestion in the report that if the woodland burial site is not progressed that Councillors could consider opening the land up and having a memorial walk through it.

Councillor Arun M Chandran proposed incorporating the development of a memory walk into Councillor Hillary's proposal. This was agreed by Councillor Hillary.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft proposed an amendment, that the report be deferred and brought back to a future Environment Committee of the new Council to consider. This proposal was seconded by Councillor Neil Collinson.

Councillor Eddy Adam pointed out that the wording within the pre-planning report from Durham County Council is standard planning guidance. He asked if the officers had the skills, experience and capacity to undertake some of the required assessments, plans and surveys.

The Works and Environment Manager explained that although his background is in conservation and he has a Team Leader who is skilled in arboriculture, the planning stage requires various plans, assessments and surveys which require licenses and specialist qualifications that he does not have.

Councillor Eddy Adam asked if Durham County Council had been approached to assist with the requirements. The Works and Environment Manager confirmed that Durham County Council had been approached and could offer general advice, but not undertake the surveys, assessments etc.

Councillor Lindsey Aston advised she was apprehensive considering the level of time and effort officers have already put into this project and the costs involved, to invest in a project that may not have a huge public demand and suggested looking into this further to gauge public demand.

Councillor Arun M Chandran stated that deferring the issue to the new Council serves no purpose, particularly as a majority of members will remain on the Council and any new members will not have the information current members have e.g. having carried out a site visit to Durham woodland burial site.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft suggested it would be easy to update any new members with a link to any relevant previous papers.

Councillor Neil Collinson argued there is a significant demand for woodland burial sites such as this, and considering the amount already invested; he felt it worth considering again in the future.

Councillor Ken Robson agreed and added that there would be no further expense in deferring the project for a year or two.

A vote was held on the amendment that the report be deferred and brought back to a future Environment Committee of the new Council to consider with the following results:

For	10
Against	10

The Chairman used his casting vote against the amendment.

The amendment failed and a vote was then held on the original motion that the Council do not proceed any further with seeking planning permission for this project but investigate the development of a memory walk on the land and bring a report back to the Environment Committee.

The vote has the following results:

For	9
Against	9

The Chairman used his casting vote for the proposal.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:-

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The woodland burial site project is not progressed at this time.
- iii) Officers further investigate the development of a memory walk on the land and bring a report back to the Environment Committee.

Chairman