

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 25TH FEBRUARY 2026

Minutes of the meeting of the **ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe, on **WEDNESDAY, 25TH FEBRUARY 2026 at 9.15pm.**

PRESENT

Councillor Martin Ashcroft (Chairman) and:
Councillors Tony Armstrong, Lindsey Aston, Jaci Beddard, Tony Beddard, Dorothy Bowman, Arun M. Chandran, Neil Collinson, Luke Ellis, George Gray, Brian Haigh, Phil Hawkins, Andy Hill, John Moore, Ken Robson, Brian Sowerby, Michael Stead, Tracey Williams, 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)
Miss Amanda Donald (Corporate and Policy Officer)
Mrs Vikki Anderson (Corporate Assistant)

IN ATTENDANCE

Four members of the public were in attendance.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft proposed that Agenda Item 6 - Allotments Report be brought forward to be discussed after public questions.

67. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Tunde Akinsanya, Lisa Conners, Richard Hutchinson, Jacqui McFadden Lewis and Carl Robinson.

68. MEMBERS' DISPENSATIONS

No applications for dispensations had been received.

69. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

70. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no public questions.

71. MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Andy Hill, seconded by Councillor Tony Beddard and:

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Environment Committee, held on 14th January 2026, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

72. 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 15th February 2026.

He gave a verbal update advising that a total of six tenancies will be terminated due to non-payment of rent.

It was highlighted that the Council had been approached by Fornax Environmental Solutions to have baseline soil sampling carried out by an independent company on the five allotment sites to provide a clear “before” picture of local soil quality with follow up testing to monitor levels once the incinerator in use, to allow future changes to be detected, managed, and communicated transparently to the community.

Councillor Arun M Chandran advised that he had no issue in principle with the request to undertake soil sampling but only if it is made clear that other sampling sites not owned by the Town Council would be used in the testing.

He raised concern that he did not want the Council being accused of endorsing the results or the use of the incinerator. Fornax could use other sites for testing and should be expected to.

He further suggested Fornax should also be billed for officers time.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft asked if the Council was not happy with the company proposed, would Fornax work with the Council to ensure a company suitable to both parties would be used.

Councillor Andy Hill recommended that an officer and a member of the Council attends the sample testing.

Councillor Arun Chandran suggested that the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Environment Committee should attend.

Councillor Ken Robson agreed that the testing exercise should not be at a cost to the Council for officers time. He suggested that Heighington, Aycliffe Village and land on the industrial estate should also be sample tested.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator explained that one of the reasons the allotments have been proposed is due to the ease of getting soil samples and that food quality can be monitored. The aim is to work together in the interest of transparency for the public and any concerns around testing can be shared.

It was proposed by Councillor Martin Ashcroft that Standing Orders be waived to allow Fornax representative Ian Jones, who was in attendance as a member of the public, to answer questions from members.

This was seconded by Councillor Ken Robson.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) Standing Orders be waived to allow Fornax representative Ian Jones to answer questions from members.

Ian Jones explained that the sample testing request from Fornax was a consequence of Heighington Parish Council asking Fornax for soil samples.

He explained that as the incinerator is based in Newton Aycliffe, he felt it best to approach Great Aycliffe Town Council initially.

He addressed Councillor Arun M Chandran's point regarding the cost of officer time and agreed with this as long as this is done transparently.

He reiterated that the request and his attendance at the meeting was for transparency reasons, adding that this is 'not a Fornax public relations stunt', but what Fornax should be doing as a responsible company to help dispel the myths surrounding the incinerator. He said Fornax has taken samples already on the incinerator site but concerns had been raised by allotments tenants about the safety of produce grown, so this is the reason for the request.

Councillor Tony Armstrong suggested that Heighington land should also be tested as they are on the boundary or just outside of it.

Ian Jones agreed that Heighington would be included but he had chosen to liaise with Great Aycliffe Town Council first, adding that he wanted to ensure Fornax is held to account and does things properly.

Councillor Lindsey Aston shared that she had concerns about the incinerator, so fully supports and appreciates Ian Jones attending the meeting and offering testing. She asked for testing to be carried out on ground that isn't being cultivated regularly to see what the build-up is over time, such as in parks and environmental areas.

Ian Jones felt this was a reasonable request and agreed to incorporate this, but highlighting that the tests come at a significant cost, so suggested substituting some allotment sites for other sites of the Council's choosing.

Councillor Tony Beddard mentioned the additives in soil on allotment sites from what is added by tenants such as fertilisers etc and agreed with Councillor Lindsey Aston's request to test other sites.

Ian Jones clarified that soil samples are taken from a depth considered deep enough for this not to be an issue. He agreed that there is a valid point that additives are added on allotment plots, but not items of concern such as heavy metals. Fornax is regularly accused of contributing towards levels of heavy metals etc, which is what will be looked at primarily by the testing, and the base will be set for. Consistency in selection of areas is key.

Councillor Arun M Chandran highlighted that farmland, play areas, open spaces and schools are of concern to residents and asked how many samples throughout the town would be taken and at what sites other than allotments.

Ian Jones replied that the report is clear that samples are only planned for allotments at the moment, as that is what was requested initially and allotment sites are spread sufficiently around the town.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator advised that he understood the members' concerns and considering all the allotment sites, parks and environmental areas the Council owns, some areas would not be cultivated, and some would be.

He suggested the proposal remains at five sites as requested, but across a variety of sites including allotments, parks, environmental areas and maybe the golf course, for example.

Councillor Tony Armstrong asked if there would be other testing carried out, such as water samples.

Ian Jones clarified that there would be no water testing as the site is fully contained and sealed, with even their own water used on site being taken out by large containers and tested. There are two air quality monitoring systems on site.

It was proposed by Councillor Andy Hill and seconded by Councillor Jaci Beddard and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) Standing Orders be reinstated.

It was proposed by Councillor Arun M Chandran and seconded by Councillor Lindsey Aston and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The request from Fornax to undertake baseline soil sampling on Council land, carried out by an independent company be agreed.
- iii) The five locations are made up of a variety of Council land across allotments, parks and environmental areas, to be agreed with Fornax, in consultation with Chairmen, Vice Chairmen and political group spokespeople.
- iv) That officer time attending the soil sampling be payable by Fornax.
- v) The Chairman and Vice Chairman of Environment Committee be invited to attend any sample testing with an officer.

73. ENVIRONMENT REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Works and Environment Manager on issues relating to the environment for the six weeks ended the 15th February 2026.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.

74. 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 15th February 2026.

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

75. GREAT AYCLIFFE GARDEN GUILD USE OF CLARENCE CHARE ALLOTMENTS – CONTRACTED OUT TENANCY AGREEMENT RENEWAL

Members considered a report from the Town Clerk requesting Members' consideration and approval for the renewal of contracted-out tenancy agreement for the use of Council land at Clarence Chare Allotments site by Great Aycliffe Garden Guild on the basis of a two-year agreement.

Councillor Martin Ashcroft suggested increasing the agreement term to three years with a clause break included. The Town Clerk clarified that the Garden Guild had specifically asked for two years this time, with a view for a longer term in the future.

It was proposed by Councillor Andy Hill, seconded by Councillor Luke Ellis and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) A further Contracted-Out Tenancy Agreement is issued to Great Aycliffe Garden Guild on the basis of a two-year agreement.
- iii) The amendments to the wording of the agreement are agreed.
- iv) The solicitor inserts a break clause into the agreement.
- v) The issue of the contracted-out tenancy paperwork by the Council's solicitor and the legal completion (signing and sealing) of the contracted-out tenancy agreement is agreed in accordance with the Council's Standing Orders.

76. GREEN ARTS USE OF MOORE LANE ECO CENTRE – CONTRACTED OUT TENANCY AGREEMENT RENEWAL

Members considered a report from the Town Clerk requesting Members' consideration and approval for the renewal of contracted-out tenancy agreement for the use of Council's Moore Lane Environment Centre by Green Arts on the basis of a three-year agreement.

Councillor Tony Armstrong asked for clarification on the car parking situation.

The Town Clerk confirmed that the car park belongs to the Council, but the Green Arts can use it under the terms of the agreement.

Councillor Michael Stead queried whether a rent is chargeable.

The Town Clerk explained that Green Arts use the building rent free but are recharged for all utilities costs such as electricity and water.

It was proposed by Councillor Luke Ellis, seconded by Councillor Lindsey Aston and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) A further Contracted-Out Tenancy Agreement is issued to Green Arts on the basis of a three-year agreement.
- iii) The solicitor inserts a break clause into the agreement.
- iv) The issue of the contracted-out tenancy paperwork by the Council's solicitor and the legal completion (signing and sealing) of the contracted-out tenancy agreement is agreed in accordance with the Council's Standing Orders.

Chairman