

SANTA TOURS SUB COMMITTEE

TUESDAY 28TH APRIL 2026

Minutes of the meeting of the **SANTA TOURS SUB COMMITTEE**, held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe, on **TUESDAY 28TH APRIL 2026** at **7.00p.m.**

COUNCILLORS PRESENT

Councillors Martin Ashcroft, Jaci Beddard, Tony Beddard, Dorothy Bowman, Arun M. Chandran, Luke Ellis, George Gray, Jacqui McFadden Lewis, John Moore, Carl Robinson, Ken Robson, Michael Stead, Tracey Williams, Anne Woodward and John Woodward.

PUBLIC AND VOLUNTEER MEMBERS

Dave Bussey, Chris Clement, Peter Jarps, Matthew Lane and Stephen Smith.

OFFICERS

Mr Dan Austin (Town Clerk)
Mrs Judith Thexton (Head of Leisure and Events)
Mrs Vikki Anderson (Corporate Assistant)

PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

No members of the public were in attendance.

9. OPENING STATEMENT BY THE TOWN CLERK

The Town Clerk opened the meeting, and provided some procedural information, highlighting that the volunteer and public members of this committee can speak at any time through the Chairman, but cannot make proposals or vote on any proposals made by councillors.

10. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been submitted by Councillors Brian Haigh, Andy Hill and Kyle Robinson, and public members Stuart Mawson and Emma Selby.

11. MEMBERS' DISPENSATIONS

No applications for dispensations had been received.

12. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest had been received.

13. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no public in attendance.

14. MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Arun M Chandran and seconded by Councillor Ken Robson and:

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Santa Tours Sub Committee, held on 3rd March 2026, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

15. SANTA TOURS UPDATE REPORT

Members considered a report from the Head of Leisure and Events and Senior Management Team providing an update on the planning of the 2026 Santa Tours Event.

The Town Clerk introduced the report, highlighting that the report put forward further information in relation to the decisions made at the last meeting with the aim of allowing the sub-committee to consider and agree the format of the 2026 Santa Tours event, and to agree the details of a public consultation on the preferred format.

He highlighted that it had been agreed at the last meeting that the fixed location 'meet and greet' format, with additional and improved locations and care home visits should be the preferred option *but* left open to ideas for improvement and evolution.

Officers had been asked to undertake further investigations on adding a tour of the streets with no stopping, including how long it would take for Santa to tour the streets, how many vehicles would be needed and route timings.

Officers were asked to update the public, which has been done. Officers have provided their findings and recommendations within the report.

The Head of Leisure and Events then gave a summary of the report, advising on the outcome of the investigations into undertaking a non-stop tour of the streets. She highlighted a total mileage to cover all safely accessible streets in the Parish of 85 miles, advising that only one Council works vehicle is currently adaptable to hold a framework and harness system to allow Santa to travel safely on the back of the vehicle, and that undertaking a full tour using only one vehicle would be impossible as it would take over nine hours.

It has highlighted that at least one additional vehicle would need to be purchased to facilitate a full tour and that this would need to be adaptable to hold a framework and harness which may not necessarily fit with its core requirements as a works vehicle and lead to significant additional costs which may not provide value for money to local taxpayers.

With regard to the discussions with the Rotary Club, the Head of Leisure and Events provided a verbal update that she had held a meeting with three representatives of the Rotary Club, who had acknowledged that their event and the Town Council Santa Tours were two very different and distinct events. Generally, they are out for 2 to 3 hours with one vehicle and do not do any work on Christmas Eve. It is mostly a walking event for volunteers, with Santa sometimes walking alongside the vehicle. They have also encountered similar problems in running their event, including access and egress to some streets, lack of volunteers, and the calibre of the people coming forward.

The Town Clerk summarised that officers were recommending that the focus in shaping the plans for the 2026 event should be on maintaining and improving the fixed location, meet and greet format, with more and improved locations, and the care home visits, but with no touring element.

He highlighted that the format of the public consultation would depend upon the decisions made and the example survey attached to the report would need to be discussed further.

He stressed that officers would welcome any further ideas for development and improvement of the event from members of the sub-committee.

Councillor Arun M Chandran thanked the officers for the comprehensive report which had answered all of the questions raised previously.

He proposed that the officer recommendation that the focus of the Santa Tours Sub Committee in shaping the plans for the 2026 event should be on maintaining and enhancing the fixed location, meet and greet format on Christmas Eve, with more and improved locations, and the care home visits, but with *no* touring element, be agreed.

He further proposed that the recommendation that officers explore opportunities for working in partnership with the Rotary Club on a touring element is not progressed as the events run by each organisation are distinct and need to be kept separate.

He suggested that officers should concentrate on offering as many additional stops as they can facilitate so as to effectively replace the touring element and remove the various safety concerns and liaise with community organisations such as the Rotary Club to get involved and assist with this.

Councillor Ken Robson congratulated the officers on wanting to work with other organisations to help resolve the issues.

Councillor Michael Stead asked a series of questions on the report.

He asked if officers had considered an alternative lower priced vehicle, such as a Nissan NT 400 as a replacement works vehicle that could be adapted for the Santa Tours.

He further asked if the Council vehicles needed to be adapted, if they would only be travelling at ten miles per hour.

He also questioned why officers were looking at having only one or two vehicles for the touring and asked whether a vehicle could be purchased specifically for the event, as he felt there needed to be a minimum of three vehicles to run the event.

He highlighted that while he understood that there had been negative public feedback received on the touring element last year, he felt that public expectations were not managed effectively so information on the proposed changes needed to be disseminated as widely as possible this year, so that the public would be more aware of the changes.

Finally, he suggested that Google Maps could be used to help the drivers navigate the routes and that having three vehicles would help to eliminate volunteer fatigue issues.

In response to the questions, the Head of Leisure and Events explained that the price quoted in the report for an Izuzu Grafter was for a vehicle that met the requirements of the works section and includes various adaptations that the works section require the vehicle to have to undertake daily tasks for the other 364 days of the year. The price quoted was not an 'off the shelf' price.

The Town Clerk added that vehicle purchases were fully investigated by officers in line with operational requirements and all options are reported to Members for approval. The key was ensuring the vehicle is fit for purpose and an Izuzu Grafter vehicle was already being successfully used by the works section.

The Head of Leisure and Events clarified that insurance approval may be possible if vehicles were driving at no more than ten miles per hour, but there would still be risks to manage. The adaptation of vehicles to fit a framework and harness would mitigate all of these risks and remove the high risks from the event risk assessment.

The Head of Leisure and Events explained that there are currently five open back vehicles suitable to have the Santa sleigh fitted, and each covered 20% of the town for the fixed location meet and greet points last year. Therefore, taking two vehicles away for a touring element would reduce coverage for the meet and greet locations by 40%.

As highlighted previously, only one current council vehicle was adaptable to house a framework and harness to allow Santa to travel on the back of the vehicle.

The Head of Leisure and Events clarified that the touring times within the report had eliminated those streets that would be too difficult or unsafe to visit.

Councillor Martin Stead suggested retaining an older vehicle as a spare to use for the event when replaced as part of the Capital Programme Budget.

The Town Clerk reiterated that the suggestion in the report of purchasing an Izuzu Grafter vehicle to replace the Mitsubishi L200, when it is due for replacement, would ensure the Council had a vehicle that can be adapted for the Santa Tours but also used for the rest of the year to meet Works Section operational requirements, but highlighted that not replacing the vehicle like for like would come at a significant additional cost and questioned whether this provided value for money.

A public representative observed that replacing the Mitsubishi L200 with an Izuzu Grafter purely on the basis of its adaptability for the Santa Tours would not offer the best value to the taxpayer.

He also raised concern with the draft survey, suggesting that the first question, asking whether the public supported the need to change the Santa Tours event to address the safety and logistical concerns, did not need to be included as it was no longer relevant and the Council was already aware that the majority of people do not want the event to change.

A volunteer representative explained that in his opinion the meet and greet format had worked better and the Council would be setting itself up to fail again by asking if the public want the event to change, as it is obvious it must change to address the safety concerns, as much as everyone would love it to stay how it was.

The Head of Leisure and Events added that seeing the joy from the children who got to engage one on one with Santa at the meet and greet locations had made her reluctant to move away from this format as it seemed to have more impact with whole families coming together to meet Santa and Santa being on the ground engaging with the children on a more personal level was magical.

However, she understands that it is difficult for people to accept that the event needs to move away from what has always been done.

Councillor Carl Robinson advised that he felt the sub-committee had taken a step backwards by reconsidering the inclusion of a tour of the streets, as it had been agreed previously that the Council would focus on maintaining and enhancing the meet and greet format. He suggested that the Council already knows the views of the public, so to consult again would leave the Council in limbo and be counterproductive.

Councillor Carl Robinson proposed that the focus in shaping the plans for the 2026 event should be on maintaining and enhancing the fixed location, meet and greet format on Christmas Eve, with more and improved locations, and care home visits, and supplementing this with a separate non-stop tour of accessible streets with Santa safely harnessed to the back of the vehicle, using the one Council works vehicle currently adaptable to hold a framework and harness.

Councillor Tony Beddard suggested that the public survey should offer different options to put to the public and stressed it was important the public have a choice after a body of work has been carried out by officers and the sub-committee.

He suggested a further option to add to the survey would be spending additional monies on a second vehicle to improve the coverage of a non-stop tour of the streets. He advised that the tours were not wholly negatively received and the main issue was that people couldn't see Santa as he was inside the vehicle.

Finally, he suggested offering public the opportunity to select more than one option and ranking these to assess the preferred options and gain more understanding.

The Town Clerk explained that officers are open to feedback on the survey, which is in draft format and dependent on what is decided at this meeting.

A volunteer representative noted that at a previous meeting it had been suggested to run the tours over two to three evenings in the run-up to Christmas and then the meet and greet locations on Christmas Eve.

The Town Clerk explained that this suggestion had been ruled out at the last meeting but that there was a suggestion in the report tonight that a touring element could be retained by running the tour on 22nd and 23rd December, which can be done with one vehicle, and then the meet and greet format on Christmas Eve.

However, the Head of Leisure and Events stressed that running the event over three nights would be a big commitment and would require the support of other officers.

A public representative asked if the resale amount from the works vehicle had already been considered in the financial implications and could this vehicle be kept as the back-up and used for the event.

The Town Clerk agreed that keeping the L200 vehicle could be considered, although it would be at the end of its estimated useful life and therefore its longevity and reliability could be a factor.

Councillor Michael Stead observed that the design of the survey questions and how the survey is publicised and distributed is very important and the Council may well need to spend money, to ensure as many people as possible are aware and contribute, for example, sending surveys out to every household.

The Town Clerk agreed that the survey questions need to be right and hoped that Members would reach a decision tonight regarding the preferred format(s) to give officers some direction, but suggested pausing the decision on the survey and allowing officers to bring a report to the next Recreation Committee meeting with an updated version of the survey for debate.

Councillor Arun M Chandran revisited his initial proposal at the start of the meeting and advised this was an attempt to home in on an agreed option as there was a need to be precise in accepting the 2025 format, but then seeking wherever possible to expand and improve the format by adding more meet and greet points and care home visits. The 2025 format had worked well but there was not enough meet and greet locations and there is a need to add as many as possible to replace the touring element, even if this takes many years to establish.

He added that on the issue of officers not seeking to work in partnership with the Rotary Club, he had no issue with the officers being free to discuss options to work with the Rotary Club on a more informal basis.

He stressed that purchasing an additional vehicle does not present best value for money in seeking to improve the tours.

With regard to the consultation, he highlighted that most of what the survey would cover, would be agreed at this meeting and therefore proposed that the Council should be asking the public if they understand and support what the Council have agreed, rather than giving them options, and that a survey is not therefore required.

He highlighted that whilst a number of people were not happy and attended the Recreation Committee or complained on social media, no formal complaints had been received and positive feedback had also been received on the meet and greet format.

The Town Clerk advised that two proposals had been put forward.

The original proposal from Councillor Arun M Chandran was to support the officer recommendation that the plans for the 2026 event should be on maintaining and enhancing the fixed location, meet and greet format on Christmas Eve, with more and improved locations, and the care home visits, but with *no* touring element.

However Councillor Carl Robinson's proposal included a separate non-stop tour of accessible streets with Santa safely harnessed to the back of the vehicle, using the one Council works vehicle currently adaptable to fit a framework and harness.

The Town Clerk asked if Councillor Arun M Chandran would be happy to incorporate Councillor Carl Robinson's proposal.

Councillor Arun M Chandran agreed to this.

Councillor Arun M Chandran and the Town Clerk clarified that the original proposal included the stipulation that officers do not further explore opportunities for working in partnership with the Rotary Club on a touring element, but that officers were free to liaise with community organisations such as the Rotary Club to get involved and assist with the meet and greet format; and that a public survey is not undertaken and that the Council instead ask the public if they understand and support what the Council have agreed, rather than giving them options.

Councillor Carl Robinson seconded Councillor Chandran's proposal, commenting that the Council knows the public response from last year, when 23 people turned up to the meeting outraged, but are now finding on numerous occasions people enjoyed the meet and greets more, that they could plan around them and it was a more personal experience.

Councillor Tony Beddard proposed an amendment to Councillor Arun Chandran's proposal that a public consultation is undertaken to gain an understanding of what residents want and with options included. He highlighted that he agreed with all other elements of the proposal.

Councillor Jaci Beddard seconded this proposal.

Councillor Tony Beddard requested a named vote.

Councillor Arun M Chandran stressed that the Council cannot deliver leaflets to every household and that members of the public had been given the opportunity to be members of this Sub-Committee. He also stressed his view that the Council should be informing the public, not asking them.

The Town Clerk suggested that officers create a few options for the public consultation and seek feedback from the volunteer and public members of this sub-committee and bring options to the next Recreation Committee meeting.

Councillor Arun M Chandran agreed to incorporate the amendment into his proposal.

Councillor Tony Beddard agreed to withdraw his amendment subject to the public consultation being considered and agreed at the next Recreation Committee.

A public representative noted regarding the surveys that as a member of the public he initially felt strongly that the event must stay the same, but over the last two meetings his opinion has changed. How the information is delivered with the necessary considerations is important. The cost for informing the public of such a significant change may be worthwhile, and the public may feel it is best value to deliver leaflets for example.

The Town Clerk summarised the proposal from Councillor Arun M Chandran as amended and seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson.

A named vote was held on the substantive motion with the following results:

For: Councillors Martin Ashcroft, Jaci Beddard, Tony Beddard, Dorothy Bowman, Arun M. Chandran, Luke Ellis, George Gray, Jacqui McFadden Lewis, John Moore, Carl Robinson, Ken Robson, Michael Stead, Tracey Williams, Anne Woodward and John Woodward (15)

Against: None

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The plans for the 2026 event should be focussed on maintaining and enhancing the fixed location, meet and greet format on Christmas Eve, with more and improved locations, and the care home visits, supplemented by a separate non-stop tour of accessible streets, with Santa safely harnessed to the back of the vehicle, using the one Council works vehicle which is currently adaptable to fit a framework and harness.
- iii) Officers do not further explore opportunities for working in formal partnership with the Rotary Club on a touring element but that officers are free to liaise with community organisations such as the Rotary Club with a view to them getting involved and assisting with the meet and greet format.
- iv) A public consultation is undertaken to gain an understanding of what residents want and that officers identify options for the format and method of the consultation, seek feedback from the volunteer and public members of this sub-committee, and bring options to the next Recreation Committee meeting for consideration.

CHAIRMAN