

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 27TH MAY 2026

Minutes of the meeting of the **ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE** held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, School Aycliffe Lane, Newton Aycliffe, on **WEDNESDAY, 27TH MAY 2026 at 8.17pm.**

PRESENT

Councillor Andy Hill (Chairman) and:

Councillors Martin Ashcroft, Richard Burchell, Arun M. Chandran, Chris Clement, Neil Collinson, Luke Ellis, George Gray, Brian Haigh, Phillip Hawkins, Sharon Hutchinson, John Moore, Carl Robinson, Kyle Robinson, 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)

Mrs Vikki Anderson (Corporate Assistant)

IN ATTENDANCE

Four members of the public were in attendance.

7. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Lindsey Aston, Jaci Beddard, Tony Beddard, Dorothy Bowman, Sandra Kirby, Jackie McFadden Lewis, Ken Robson and Brian Sowerby.

8. MEMBERS' DISPENSATIONS

No applications for dispensations had been received.

9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

10. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

A member of the public spoke highlighting the health risks of the use of herbicides and spoke in support of the Council's policy on the restricted use of herbicides on Council land.

She raised a number of concerns about School Aycliffe Wetlands, highlighting that it is an area that needs to be managed more effectively and nurtured.

She identified issues such including the flooding of the woodland next to Redhouse beck, accessibility, over pruning of trees and bushes, the decimation of the wildflower meadow, road planings being used for pathways which contain micro plastics and rubber which leaks into the wetlands and is harmful to wildlife.

She highlighted that in Spring 2025 the path at the far northwest end, which is an underground stream, was diverted into the Redhouse beck. This stream would have fed the pond throughout the year and last year it was close to drying up.

She highlighted that attempts had been made to improve the pathways in the wetlands, but when it rained the area flooded and the footpaths were washed away. She suggested it was maybe time to abandon the idea of improving the pathways.

The member of the public specifically asked if the area next to Redhouse Beck is designated as a wetlands and if so, why is it not maintained as a wetland?

The Works and Environment Manager responded to the comments and questions, confirming that the area next to Redhouse Beck is considered a wetlands and as such is regularly inundated with water, as had been discussed previously in 2023, regarding the footpath improvements.

He shared some sympathy regarding the footpaths but highlighted that the paths are there to allow public access and therefore need to be maintained.

He explained that in periods of heavy rain, the unmade paths at the western fringe were particularly badly impacted, as the water comes down the mud track, entering the formal route into the wetlands. A catch drain was installed last year to drain some of the water across. However, Redhouse Beck still overflows, bursts the bank and the whole wetland is then inundated with water.

The pond becoming dry last year was due to the exceptionally dry spring and summer last year. The water level was significantly reduced, but this was the same for all ponds across the country. Cleaning it out is avoided as far as possible, as it causes significant disturbance to the pond.

He explained that the tree in the meadow was cut down and stacked to the side with a view to stop people encroaching onto the meadow. The meadow stump has since regrown but the Council's stump grinder machine has been unavailable to address this until recently, so this does now need removing.

He highlighted that the black thorn scrub on the top loop across the North and South of the Wetland had taken over the existing path, so was cleared back and the bottom area was cleared back to enable a drain to be installed into the pond to catch water from the footpath and divert it back into the beck.

Regarding the path improvements being unfinished, good headway was made last year, building it up to the raised water level and once complete the idea is that people will use this instead of the 'original' footpath which is regularly flooded.

He explained that road planings have been used in numerous locations to build pathways up so that the water would flow from the beck, but he accepted the points made about the plainings containing plastics and rubber and would take this on board.

The member of the public stressed that the cutting of the blackthorn was more than simple trimming back and highlighted that there was no drain from the meadow to the pond area. She suggested that an alternative way of dealing with flooding would be to hold the water in the wetlands. She highlighted that road planings are fine to be used if the footpath is not next to a waterway. She suggested that building up the path is effectively building a dam, so the water will flow back into the golf course, suggesting the need to concentrate on the path around the wetlands.

The Works and Environment Manager advised that he would be happy to discuss the various concerns further with the member of the public outside of the meeting.

Councillor Arun M Chandran suggested the Chairman and Vice Chairman, along with the Works and Environment Manager, the member of the public and any other Councillors who wish to attend, should be invited to a site visit at School Aycliffe Wetlands to discuss the various issues.

He also requested that for any agenda future items relating to Council land, it would be useful to have the site outlined on Google Maps on the projector screen for any councillors who are not familiar with the site in question.

Another member of the public asked the Works and Environment Manager if the bedding plants in the parks belong to the Town Council or County Council.

The Works and Environment Manager confirmed they were Town Council plants.

11. MINUTES

It was proposed by Councillor Carl Robinson, seconded by Councillor George Gray and:

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Environment Committee, held on 8th April 2026, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

12. ALLOTMENTS REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator on issues relating to the allotments for the seven weeks ended the 17th May 2026.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator gave a verbal update regarding the surrendered pigeon plot referenced in the report, advising that the tenant who had surrendered the plot had requested a month to clear the plot.

He further advised that there had been ongoing issues with aggressive bee behaviour at the St Oswald's Allotments site, causing concerns with tenants on site and raising health and safety concerns.

Officers have investigated the issue and Aycliffe Bee Keepers Association had identified an aggressive hive which was subsequently removed in April. A second hive was identified in May was split, but further concerns were reported and the queen was humanely culled. On 25th May further concerns were raised and the hive believed to be responsible has been sealed. The Council has a responsibility to ensure the site remains safe for all tenants. As such, it has been arranged for the Regional Bee Inspector to carry out an inspection on the beekeeping plots on 1st June. This is not a punitive measure, but a supportive way to work with tenants and provide guidance in resolving the issue of aggressive bee behaviour with Aycliffe Bee Keepers Association also attending.

Councillor Carl Robinson commented that there are currently 192 people on the waiting list for an allotment and with 20 people identified as having their allotment in poor condition, he asked if there was a need to be more prudent with the termination of these tenancies.

The Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator explained that allotment law protects both the tenant and the landowner and, therefore, no action can be taken for 90 days. After that period, a 30-day notice is issued. He advised that, previously, a second maintenance letter would be sent, but this is no longer the case, and matters are now escalated directly to a 30-day termination notice. He added that tenants will often surrender the site voluntarily.

It was proposed by Councillor Martin Ashcroft, and seconded by Councillor Kyle Robinson and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The pigeon plot tenant be granted one month to clear the plot.

13. ENVIRONMENT REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Works and Environment Manager on issues relating to the environment for the seven weeks ended the 17th May 2026.

The Works and Environment Manager verbally updated members that the 2026 Garden Competition nominations were now open, requesting nominations for the best gardens, hanging basket and community garden on the town. He asked councillors to promote the competition and send him any nominations.

With regard to the use of herbicides, Councillor Carl Robinson proposed supporting the officers recommendations and commented that there is a need to make an allowance to spray around bases of trees on the Oak Leaf Golf Course, West Cemetery and Stephenson Way Cemetery as identified, but also in areas such as Aycliffe Village Greens, as he had been approached by residents asking for this work to be done.

The Works and Environment Manager clarified that the aim is to significantly reduce the use of herbicides to protect the environment, staff, wildlife and public, as per the current Council policy, but this must be balanced against the needs of service users and the general public as well, and is a very delicate balance.

He explained that the golf course greenkeepers have regularly expressed their concerns and issues, golf shop staff are of the opinion that golfers expect a neat and manicured appearance, and we could be at risk of losing members if fairways and greens are allowed to grow wild. Cemeteries are also an area where a more manicured appearance is important to users of the facility.

More generally, in parks and other amenity land, if the trimming of the fringes around trees is delayed for a couple of weeks, members of the public will very quickly complain about this. So, whilst staff limit the use of herbicides as much as possible, there needs to be some discretion.

Councillor Arun M Chandran commented that he raised this issue in 2022 due to large bare patches on the grass following herbicides being used around the base of trees and possibly being spilled. After having discussions with officers he had no issue with them being used at the golf course. He was less sure about their use in the cemeteries but if people are complaining about neatness, then he could accept that.

However he had noted that tree bases around the sports complex had recently been sprayed and even the young trees, and at West Park where herbicides are not being used, the grass around the bases is being cut more closely.

He stressed that works operatives should only be spraying safety surfaces and footpaths but nowhere else should be sprayed outside of the cemeteries and golf course. He suggested that any other areas should be agreed with the local ward councillors first.

Councillor Andy Hill highlighted that a reminder had recently been issued to works operatives regarding the Council's policy on use of herbicides.

The Works and Environment Manager asked for clarification about the strimming of grass collars around trees, which if not cut back can grow to about two feet tall and look a mess.

Councillor Arun M Chandran clarified he had no problem in discretion being used in strimming around the base of trees to tidy up specific areas, and that the use of herbicides is the main concern.

The Works and Environment Manager explained that councils all around the country have looked at options to stop using herbicides and most have moved away from this as every time operatives are cutting the grass and they trim the trees, hundreds possibly thousands of trees, is too big of an expectation. Every couple of months such as using herbicides, is different. The simple answer is to spray as it's the most cost-effective way as it is treated once or twice a year. The council has made a stance to minimise the use wherever possible which I totally appreciate, but it also has to be cost effective. We would need more operatives as it is not practical to trim every tree in every park.

Councillor Tracey Williams asked the Works and Environment Manager if he could share a social media post, as had been done in previous years, about what Giant Hogweed is and why to avoid it etc.

The Works and Environment Manager commented that the hogweed had recently been treated, and he agreed to share a social media post about it.

It was proposed by Councillor Michael Stead, and seconded by Councillor Kyle Robinson that the report be received and that an allowance is made for the spraying herbicide around trees on the Oak Leaf Golf Course and West Cemetery and Stephenson Way Cemetery and the strimming of grass collars around the bases of trees as required. It was further proposed that discretion is given to officers to undertake selective use in other areas, such as Aycliffe Village Greens, subject to consulting on this with the local ward councillors.

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) An allowance is made for the spraying herbicide around trees on the Oak Leaf Golf Course and West Cemetery and Stephenson Way Cemetery, and the strimming of grass collars around the bases of trees in other areas, as required.
- iii) Herbicides are not used in other areas, but discretion is given to officers undertake selective use in areas such as Aycliffe Village Greens, subject to consulting on this with the local ward councillors.

14. CEMETERIES REPORT

Members considered an update report from the Grounds Maintenance Services Co-ordinator on items relating to the cemeteries for the seven weeks ended the 17th May 2026.

It was proposed by Councillor Arun M Chandran, seconded by Councillor George Gray and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.

15. 2026/27 WORKS AND ENVIRONMENT SERVICE PLAN

Members considered a report from the Works and Environment Manager setting out the 2026/27 Works and Environment Service Plan for approval.

It was proposed by Councillor Arun M Chandran, seconded by Councillor Carl Robinson and:

RESOLVED – that it be recommended that:

- i) The report be received.
- ii) The 2026/27 Works and Environment Service Plan be approved.

Chairman