Ashburton Town Council

Minutes of the Extraordinary Full Council meeting held on Tuesday 29th September 2026 at 7.30pm, in the Council Chambers of the Town Hall.

Present: Cllrs. Wood, Coles, Distin, Giles, James, Nutley, Pugh, Searight, Snowsill and Turner.
In attendance: The Clerk and Deputy Clerk

Cllr. Wood opened the meeting and welcomed those present.

116.26 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr. Bovey due to a prior commitment. The absence of Cllr. Harper was noted though no apologies received.

Resolution

ACCEPTED
Proposed: Cllr. Pugh
Seconded: Cllr. Turner

117.26 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None received.

118.26 PRAYERS PRIOR TO THE MEETING.

To consider the Council's custom of holding prayers prior to meetings of the Full Council; to determine whether this practice should continue and, if so, the arrangements to be adopted.

Cllr. Nutley read a prepared statement (Appendix 1) regarding prayers and the traditional formal dress code. The Clerk explained "For information, there is specific legislation relating to prayers at council meetings. The Local Government (Religious etc. Observances) Act 2015 provides that council business may include time for prayers, religious observance, or observance connected with a religious or philosophical belief.

There is no legal requirement for the Council to discontinue prayers, but equally there is no requirement for the Council to hold them. It is a matter for Council to determine. If members wish the custom of prayers to continue, I suggest that Council is clear about the arrangements, including when prayers take place, who leads them (for example when the Reverend is present) and that participation is voluntary. Members who do not wish to participate should not be placed under any obligation to do so."

The Chair then asked each Councillor in turn to give their opinion:

Cllr. Turner feels that the practice is outdated and not inclusive.
Cllr. Distin noted that he is the longest serving Councillor. He feels that the decision should be left to the Chair of the time.
Cllr. Giles feels that Council should still have prayers.
Cllr. Pugh does not have a strong opinion either way but does believe that the practice alienates some people and other religions.

Cllr. Searight is comfortable with prayers but does understand that not everyone is. He still wants a reflection of some sort i.e. the Chair calling for 30 second reflection.

Cllr. James stated that she is a member of the local church.

Cllr. Snowsill paid respect to Cllr. Nutley and other long serving Councillors. Prayers may not be the best option in current times.

Cllr. Coles believes that it is important to have some kind of reflection/grounding, not necessarily religious.

Cllr Nutley added that, in his opinion, the prayers currently used are not religion specific and that there is no harm in a short three-line prayer.
Cllr. Nutley proposed that the Full Council meeting structure continues as it is currently; seconded by Cllr. Giles. There was no further support for this proposal.

Cllr. Turner believes that there should be a period of reflection before the meeting starts. She proposed that prior to a meeting there is a short reflection. The Chair may choose to speak but there is to be no religious observance. Seconded by Cllr. Coles. Cllrs. Coles, Distin, James, Pugh, Searight, Snowsill, Turner and Wood were all in favour of this proposal.

Resolution
APPROVED – A short period of reflection before the meeting starts.
Proposed: Cllr. Turner
Seconded: Cllr. Coles

The Clerk asked for clarification as to what happens if a religious leader is in the room at the start of a meeting. It was proposed that the Chair would ask if they wish to lead a reflection but not a prayer. This was passed with Cllr. Coles abstaining from the vote.

Resolution

APPROVED – Any religious leader present would be asked to lead this reflection but not a prayer.
Proposed: Cllr. Snowsill
Seconded: Cllr. Cllr. Nutley

Cllr. Distin then sought clarification on whether Councillors should stand or sit during this time. Standing was proposed and agreed.

Resolution
APPROVED – To stand during the period of reflection.
Proposed: Cllr. Distin
Seconded: Cllr. Turner

119.26 DRESS CODE FOR COUNCIL MEETINGS.

To consider whether the Council wishes to establish guidance regarding appropriate standards of dress for Councillors attending meetings of the Full Council.

Cllr. Nutley referred to the statement he read previously. He wishes all men to be "suited and booted" i.e. suit or jacket, trousers and a tie, and women dressed smartly.

Cllr. Coles stated his opinion that he would struggle with that. He accepts that to attend a meeting dressed scruffily is disrespectful but suits can make people uncomfortable too.

Cllr. Snowsill suggested three options:

1. Dress respectfully but give Councillors the credit to interpret this
2. Everybody must conform to a particular dress code which will exclude many people
3. Councillors could apply for funding for the correct clothing but does not feel that is the correct way to spend residents' money.

Cllr. James reported that pharmacists used to have to be "suited and booted" but no longer.

Cllr. Searight is happy to wear a suit as it gives him a change of gear. He has no problem with the dress code and pointed out that Councillors are here to carry out a civic duty regardless of what they are wearing.

Cllr. Pugh commented that you can only make people wear certain clothes if they are provided. She added that times do change and one needs to adapt and be all inclusive now.

Cllr. Giles said she always dresses smarter for Full Council than the other meetings.

Cllr. Distin feels similar to Cllrs. Coles, Searight and Snowsill.

Cllr. Nutley stated that he will continue to wear a suit and show respect.

Cllr. Wood reminded Councillors that no-one has the right to judge what anyone else is wearing. Councillors should simply wear something that enables them to do their job.

The Clerk added that there is no legal dress code but also a Council has no legal power to spend on clothing for Councillors.

Cllr. Nutley proposed that there is a code, consisting of men being "suited and booted" and women smart. There was no seconder.

Cllr. Searight proposed the wording "must wear smart respectful clothing that is not inappropriate" This was seconded by Cllr. Distin. Before the full vote was taken Cllr. Snowsill stated he would abstain from that and proposed the wording simply be "no formal dress code" as otherwise some people would still feel excluded; seconded Cllr. Turner. A named vote then took place.

Resolution

APPROVED: the Town Council should have no formal dress code
Proposed: Cllr. Snowsill
Seconded: Cllr. Turner
For: Cllrs. Coles, James, Pugh, Snowsill, Turner and Wood.
Against: Cllrs. Distin, Giles, Nutley and Searight.

120.26 CIVILITY AND RESPECT PLEDGE

The Clerk explained that the Civility and Respect Pledge was developed by NALC, the Society of Local Council Clerks, One Voice Wales and county associations in response to concerns about bullying, harassment and intimidation within the local council sector. More than 1,000 councils had signed the Pledge by early 2023 and NALC continues to actively promote it. Signing the Pledge represents an organizational commitment by the Council. Among other things, councils commit to appropriate training, good governance arrangements, calling out bullying and harassment, seeking professional support where problems arise and continuing to develop good practice. This item therefore asks members to determine whether Ashburton Town Council wishes to formally sign the Civility and Respect Pledge.

After brief discussion it was agreed to move this item to the Full Council meeting to be held 13th October.

ACTION – To move this item to the next Full Council's agenda, 13th October 2026

121.26 Matters raised by Councillors for information only or for inclusion on a future agenda.

Cllr. Nutley asked the Clerk's office to investigate whether Town Councillors should be DBS checked.

ACTION

Cllr. Searight sought clarification on whether Councillors should stand when addressing the Chair. After discussion it was agreed that, yes, at Full Council meetings.

Cllr. Wood closed the meeting at 21.00

SIGNED _____ DATE _____

Ashburton Town Council

Action Points Arising from the Extraordinary Full Council Meeting Held on Tuesday 29th September 2026 at 7.30pm in the Council Chambers of the Town Hall

Agenda Item	Actions	Responsible
120.26	Add Civility and Respect Pledge to the October Full Council agenda.	Clerk's office
121.26	Investigate whether Town Councillors should be DBS checked.	Clerk's office

Ashburton Town Council

Appendix 1

It has been a long standing tradition of this council that for our full council meetings, the men as you will see from the photos on the back wall have always been suited and booted and ladies smartly dressed, These steps have been carried out by Councillors in the distant past and set a president for the future, and because these meetings are open to the public many councillors maintain a strict standard of formal dress to project a professional image and show respect for the council chamber.

It is only recently that traditions in Ashburton Town Council have been challenged, one tradition has been to say prayers at the start of the meeting in which Councillors and members of the public may either stand or remain seated. This has normally been carried out by the vicar. In their absence then the chair of the council would say them. Should they not wish to then a councillor could be nominated to say them.

At the last full council meeting, the Rev Phil Parker attended and which he would normally have said prayers before the opening of the meeting. I would like to know the reasons why he was told not to say prayers, which I find this disrespectful.

The traditions of ATC and Ashburton as a whole is imbedded in Ashburton history, and although the argument is that times change standards don't.

For men to be suite and booted and ladies smartly dressed shows respect for a position on the council and should come foremost in peoples thoughts. Being formally dressed for one full council meeting a month should not be beyond Councillors to commit to.

Another tradition in showing respect is for Councillors to stand when addressing the chair and councillors, is this to be challenged as well.

Yesterday we received an email from the Town Clerk with an attachment on Civility and Respect. I have always said civility cost nothing but some think otherwise, and to receive respect you should give respect and that is why I am asking that we show respect for all the years of traditions that this council upholds.

I contacted a Newton Abbot Town Councillor and asked what tradition they have

Hi John

Nearly 20 years now on Town Council.
Full Council Smart Dress (Jacket/Suit/Tie) Men suited and booted Smart for Ladies.
Hot weather has been a little relaxed.
Other meetings less formal but Smart casual.
Prayers before meetings or similar Yes. If Mayor is Atheist which we do have one, then perhaps a reading.

In view of this, I would therefore propose that we continue with our traditions for full council meetings and I am asking if a vote is required that a named vote is carried out..