

COMMITTEE: Musselburgh Common Good Committee

MEETING DATE: Thursday 12th March 2026

BY:

REPORT TITLE: Musselburgh Festival

REPORT STATUS: Public

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek approval from members to make annual provision within the Musselburgh Common Good Fund to provide funding for significant annual Musselburgh events.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are recommended to:

- 2.1 Approve building into the base line budget for the Musselburgh Common Good Fund an amount of £25,000 per annum to support the Musselburgh Festival, which amount is to be reviewed annually through the Musselburgh Common Good Budget development and approval process.
- 2.2 Note that the provision set in 2.1 would be reviewed annually thereafter through the budget development and setting process for the Musselburgh Common Good Fund.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Musselburgh, often celebrated as Scotland's oldest continuously inhabited town, has a rich civic heritage shaped by centuries of community pride, royal association, and deeply rooted local traditions. Throughout its history, the town has balanced its strategic importance with a strong sense of identity built on loyalty, industriousness, and ceremonial custom. Among the many traditions that embody this spirit, two stand out for their longevity and cultural significance: the Silver Arrow archery competition, one of Scotland's oldest sporting prizes, and the

traditions of the Honest Toun and Riders of the Marches, which express Musselburgh's enduring commitment to civic duty and communal unity. Together, these customs form a vibrant narrative of a town that has preserved and celebrated its heritage across the centuries.

- 3.2 Musselburgh's identity as the "Honest Toun" is rooted in a 14th-century story in which the townspeople cared with integrity and loyalty for the wounded Regent Randolph, earning lasting royal praise. This spirit of communal honour is most vividly embodied in the Riders of the Marches, a centuries-old tradition connected to the inspection and safeguarding of Musselburgh's medieval boundaries. Originally a practical duty to ensure the town's lands had not been encroached upon, the custom evolved into a spectacular civic celebration held every twenty-one years. Featuring mounted riders, ceremonial roles, music, and public festivities, Riders of the Marches stands as one of Musselburgh's defining traditions—an enduring expression of civic pride, shared heritage, and community cohesion.
- 3.3 Adding to the town's rich tapestry of custom is the Musselburgh Festival. This is an annual celebration bringing together residents in a week of events, ceremonies, and entertainment. Rooted in community spirit, the festival showcases the town's traditions, youth, and cultural identity. Featuring processions, family events, sports, performances, and the crowning of festival representatives, it serves as a contemporary counterpart to Musselburgh's older customs. The Musselburgh Festival provides a platform for new generations to connect with the town's heritage while adding fresh vibrancy and creativity to the civic calendar. I have attached in appendix to this report a timeline of the key events relating to the Musselburgh Festival and Riding of the Marches.
- 3.4 Officers appreciate the historical and cultural significance of the Musselburgh Festival to residents of Musselburgh and in addition note this event also creates an economical benefit for Musselburgh businesses.
- 3.5 It is noted that the Council has continued to support the Musselburgh Festival and Riding of the Marches and while the next Riding of the Marches is scheduled to be held in 2037 the significance and importance of the Musselburgh Festival to residents in Musselburgh is such that officers consider this should continue to be supported by the Council through building in a an annual provision into the Musselburgh Common Good budget to support the continued operation of this event. Noting that on years where the Riding of the Marches occur the festival is assumed by that event and therefore would not be provided for within this budget. In 2016 the Common Good provided funding of £100,000 to support the last Riding of the Marches event.
- 3.6 The provision for the Musselburgh Festival would be available to the organisers of the event currently the Honest Toun Association. It is noted that since 2017 the support has been reduced from circa £50,000 to circa £25,000 in 2025. Officers would continue to work with the

organisers to ensure best value and that other funding options are also explored to support the festival. Officers would suggest for 2026/27 there is a provision of £25,000 built into the Musselburgh Common Good budget for the Musselburgh Festival and thereafter the actual amount would be agreed annually through the budget setting process for the Musselburgh Common Good Fund.

- 3.7 The Silver Arrow is one of Scotland's oldest and most storied archery trophies, with origins tracing back to the early 17th century. First awarded in 1603, the prize became associated with Musselburgh after the Royal Company of Archers—later recognised as the Sovereign's Bodyguard in Scotland—took up the tradition and relocated the shoot to the town in the late 1600s. Over the centuries, the annual competition has blended ceremonial splendour with sporting prestige, with winners historically receiving not only the Silver Arrow but also the honour of adding their own medallion to its ribbons. Today, the Musselburgh Silver Arrow remains a living link to Scotland's heritage, celebrated for its continuity, pageantry, and deep historical importance to the town.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no policy implications arising from this report.

5 RESOURCE AND OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Finance: The funding would be taken directly from the Musselburgh Common Good Fund
- 5.2 Human Resources: None
- 5.3 Other (e.g. Legal/IT): None
- 5.4 Risk: None

6 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 6.1 ***Select the statement that is appropriate to your report by placing an 'X' in the relevant box.***

An Integrated Impact Assessment screening process has been undertaken, and the subject of this report does not affect the wellbeing of the community or have a significant impact on: equality and human rights; tackling socio-economic disadvantages and poverty; climate change, the environment and sustainability; the Council's role as a corporate parent; or the storage/collection of personal data.



or

The subject of this report has been through the Integrated Impact Assessment process and impacts have been identified as follows:

Subject	Impacts identified (Yes, No or N/A)
Equality and human rights	
Socio-economic disadvantage/poverty	
Climate change, the environment and sustainability	
Corporate parenting and care-experienced young people	
Storage/collection of personal data	
Other	

[Enter information on impacts that have been identified]

The Integrated Impact Assessment relating to this report has been published and can be accessed via the Council's website:

https://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/info/210602/equality_and_diversity/12014/integrated_impact_assessments

7 APPENDICES

7.1 Appendix A – Sets out the historical timeline

8 BACKGROUND PAPERS

8.1 None

9 AUTHOR AND APPROVAL DETAILS

Report Author(s)

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Date	04 March 2026

Head of Service Approval

Name	Hayley Barnett
Designation	Head of Corporate Services
Confirmation that IIA and other relevant checks (e.g. finance/legal) have been completed	
Approval Date	04.03.2026

Appendix 1

Historical Timeline - Musselburgh Festival & Riding of the Marches

1124

- Possible early origins of the ceremony connected to Musselburgh's first burgh charter granted by King David I, which later influenced boundary-marking traditions.

1544

- A fire at the Town House destroys early written records of the Riding of the Marches.

1682

- First surviving written documentation of Musselburgh's Riding of the Marches appears in Town Council minutes.

1732

- A famous dispute occurs between the weavers and tailors over precedence in the procession; the tailors ultimately prevail with help from the butchers.

1914

- The Riding of the Marches is cancelled due to the First World War.

1919

- A celebratory "Peace Riding" marks the end of the war; from this point the event begins to evolve into a week-long festival format later seen in modern times.

1935

- A landmark Riding of the Marches, held alongside King George V's Silver Jubilee, is celebrated as "the greatest ever."
- Inspired by its success, a group of local residents meet in Hercus Loan and found what becomes the Musselburgh Festival, intended to complement—not compete with—the 21-year Riding cycle.

1936

- The first formal Honest Toun Association celebrations take place, recorded in surviving film footage; the Honest Lad and Lass appear as festival principals.

1956

- The Queen Mother attends a special ceremony and presents the Turf Cutter with a ceremonial spade, marking a rare royal participation.

2016

- A full Riding of the Marches takes place, continuing the 21-year tradition; extensive local historical documentation highlights its ritual significance.

2037 (Future Scheduled Event)

- The next full Riding of the Marches is planned, maintaining the 21-year cycle.