Barlaston Parish Council: Chairman's Report for the Annual Parish Meeting:6th May 2025

Good evening everyone, and thank you for attending tonight's meeting. The Annual Parish Meeting is a gathering of local electors in a civil parish, providing an opportunity to hear reports from local groups, raise issues, and discuss parish matters. It is important to note that this is not a Parish Council meeting. All electors are welcome to speak and vote on matters raised.

It gives me great pleasure to reflect on the work of Barlaston Parish Council during the 2024/2025 financial year.

Staffing

In August 2024, we appointed a new Clerk, Viv O'Dunne. Viv has already completed initial training and will begin the Certificate in Local Council Administration later this year. We would like to express our sincere thanks to Karen St Leger for her valuable support and advice during the transition and after her retirement.

Governance & Finance

The Parish Council meets monthly to consider a wide range of village matters. We encourage public participation through the Open Forum held at the beginning of each meeting.

Our year-end internal audit has just been completed, and we will soon submit our Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) to the external auditor. This return demonstrates the council's responsible management of public funds and compliance with national regulations.

Following advice from the internal auditor, the Council increased the precept for 2024/25 to strengthen general reserves. The precept was set at £108,923, with a Band D charge of £103.48 per property.

General reserves are held for unexpected costs. JPAG (Joint Panel on Accountability & Governance) guidance recommends councils hold between three and twelve months of expenditure, with smaller councils leaning towards the higher end. Our general reserve was set at £30,000; some additional surplus funds will roll forward to 2025/26.

We also hold earmarked reserves, currently allocated as follows:

- Election: £7,000
- Village Hall contingency: £10,000
- Village Hall renovations: £43,273
- Playpark: £50,000
  Total Earmarked Reserves: £110,273.00

We will continue to build the Playpark earmarked reserve.

The Council's accounts for 2024/25 will be available for public inspection during the statutory exercise of public rights period in June and July. The exact dates will be confirmed at next week's Council meeting. All details will be published on our website and Facebook page.

Planning & Development

The Parish Council remains committed to preserving the character of our village and the surrounding Green Belt, while considering planning applications in line with the policies set out in our Neighbourhood Plan. Our Design Codes, Housing Needs Assessment, and Neighbourhood Plan are all available on the Council's website. A review of the Neighbourhood Plan is now underway in response to changes in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), and a draft has been submitted to the Borough Council for screening.

Village Maintenance

We thank Paul from Buxus Green, our contractor for grass cutting and maintenance, for his hard work throughout the year.

In 2024/25:

- Groundworks were carried out at The Downs car park, benches were repaired and renewed, and new signage was installed to deter overnight camping (after discovering the site was listed online as a camping location!).
- The Culvert on the Green was cleared and further works on this are planned for 2025/26.
- Significant tree work was completed on the Village Green following our bi-annual tree survey.
- Repairs were carried out on both the MUGA and Wildplay Area, addressing issues raised in the annual RoSPA report.
- Councillors audited all Parish assets, and repair work is scheduled for 2025/26.
- A new bench was installed on the Village Green, funded with a bequest from the estate of Lyndsey Willis.
- A bequest from the estate of Renee Robinson funded four new Tommy figures so that two can be displayed in each of our three wards each November.

The Parish Council continues to fund:

- Regular litter bin emptying by the Borough Council
- Four annual visits from the Civic Amenity Lorry.

- Room hire for the monthly *Warm Welcome Wednesday's* here at the Methodist Church.

Leases

We are in the final stages of agreeing a new lease with Barlaston Cricket Club, which we hope will be signed shortly. Work is also underway to secure a lease for the former play area on Meadow Road; we plan to hold a public consultation to help determine the preferred play equipment for the site.

Village Hall

Significant work has been done to formalise the relationship between the Parish Council and the Village Hall Charity. As Sole Trustee, the Council is taking steps to ensure compliance before any major spending can take place.

Communication

The Clerk produces a monthly newsletter published on our website and featured in the Church magazine.

Following an audit recommendation, the Council has successfully moved to a .gov.uk website domain, which is fully accessible and easier to navigate. In addition, all councillors and the Clerk now use .gov.uk email addresses, in line with external audit advice.

Community Engagement

In 2024/25, the Parish Council supported several local groups and initiatives. We will share these at item 5 on the agenda.

We currently have a casual vacancy in the Barlaston Park Ward. If you are interested in joining the Council, please speak to us after the meeting or download the application form from the website.

Recognition:

The Parish Council will award Michala Black the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Award for her significant contribution to all areas of village life. Certificates of Commendation will also go to:

Charlotte Davies
Becky Wilshaw
Gill Brealey
Mandy Bloor
Irene & Dave Moran
The Green Family
Lynne Coates
Shane Brunt
Gareth Jones

Thank You

Finally, I would like to thank all councillors, our Clerk Viv O'Dunne, and the many residents who have generously given their time and energy to support and improve our village.

Presented by Cllr Sue Tudor
Chairman, Barlaston Parish Council