

ANNUAL REPORT
2025-2026
Cllr Paul Berry, Chairman of the Council

As usual, I begin with an update on any changes in Councillors over the last year; one vacancy arose following the resignation of Steve Thomas and following co-option we welcomed Marie Montoya. I would like to thank Mr Thomas for his time on the Council and wish Cllr. Montoya every success in the role. I had the privilege of being re-elected Chairman of the Council last May. A full list of Councillors is on the website.

Our Councillors, who all give their time freely, supported by Officers, run much of the day-to-day affairs of the Council through its COMMITTEES which all meet in public and to which anyone is always welcome to attend. In addition, we continue to stream meetings to the internet via Facebook and YouTube, which seems to work well, and we have further improved the streaming quality following the purchase of new equipment. You can of course watch previous meetings via the link on our website.

During 2025 the **PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE** met on 15 occasions — including 12 regular meetings and two extraordinary meetings to consider planning applications whose deadlines for comment might otherwise have been missed, and one extraordinary meeting to confirm the Committee's response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Reform of Planning Committees technical consultation, which will see planning authorities across the UK following the same committee template. Our response is on our dedicated web page on consultations.

Through the fourteen meetings where applications were discussed, the Committee considered and responded to 132 planning applications, up from 85 the previous year. Of these, the Committee found cause to object to only 21 applications (20 in 2024) and six of those were then withdrawn or refused by Horsham District Council (HDC).

Water Neutrality has been at the forefront of planning conversation this year when an agreement was reached between Natural England, Southern Water and the Environment Agency that a reduction in the licence cap on water abstraction would ensure with sufficient certainty that development will not adversely impact the protected Arun Valley habitats. This agreement led to an increase in applications where requests were being made to remove conditions on previously agreed permissions. It will also see a shift in planning moving into 2026.

The Committee continues to review requests from developers for road naming for new developments and offers suggestions from the Committee's approved list.

As always, it is worth remembering that Billingshurst Parish Council does not have the authority or powers to either grant or refuse planning applications, it can only submit comments to Horsham District Council, which is the planning authority.

Following Horsham District Council's request to re-open the examination of its 2023-2040 Local Plan, the Government's newly appointed Planning Inspector, Jonathan Bore has now confirmed that he will approach the examination afresh and a revised workplan and timing schedule have been announced. Whilst this has seen uncertainty in 2025, it may well see a change in approach from developers in 2026.

Whereas Billingshurst Parish Council remains largely opposed to large-scale development in the Parish, it is reluctantly acknowledged that more development will be forthcoming, and as such, the Council remains open to dialogue with the planning authority and potential developers to try to ensure that any development which does take place, brings maximum benefits in terms of community facilities and infrastructure.

The **PROPERTY COMMITTEE**, meeting approximately bi-monthly, oversees the management of the Council's various sites and other equipment and street furniture in its care.

At Jubilee Fields we continue to support the Billingshurst Sports and Recreation Association (BSRA) to realise their ambitions to improve the facilities using existing S106 funds. The replacement of further fishing pontoons around the lake is planned for this year and we are looking at replacing failing fitness stations around the trim trail with something new and more appealing.

Five new bus shelters installed as part of the original East of Billingshurst development were formally transferred to the Council along with a commuted sum. (Current vandalism is due to be repaired soon.)

The Tennis Club's new 25-year lease has now been signed and sealed.

Our contractor carried out the full clearance of the banks of the Parbrook through Lower Station Road Rec Ground and representatives from Billigreen hope that this will assist the local Housemartin population.

The public conveniences in Mill Lane continue to fair well in the Loo of the Year Awards, again gaining a platinum rating. Sadly, the facility continues to be targeted by vandals.

Station Road Community Gardens, St Mary's Churchyard and Billingshurst village all did well in the South & South East in Bloom competition, some significantly improving their scores. We were delighted to once again host the local Billingshurst in Bloom Competition and for the very first time, support the debut Billingshurst Open Gardens. We are grateful to all the volunteers who help look after the Gardens, Jubilee Fields, the Churchyard and other sites across the parish.

In Station Road Community Gardens, the long-awaited Safer Routes to School path was completed in October and is a welcome addition to the site. Officers were successful in drawing down S106 funding in the sum of £30,550, meaning the capital cost of the project was met in full by funding.

The Council extended the Christmas Lights in the village as far as West Street for the first time and are looking at further improvements, including new designs on lampposts. It was good to see some new entries in the Best Christmas Shop Window competition.

Much of the play equipment at Cherry Tree Close has been reconstructed and Cranham Avenue Play Area is also looking much more presentable with more works planned. Works have also been carried out on play areas at Lower Station Road Recreation Ground, Station Road Community Gardens and Manor Fields to keep them safe to use.

We received the keys back from the trustees at Adversane Hall who sadly took the decision to fold, due to no new volunteers coming forward and a lack of interest from new hirers. The

Council is now marketing the site for sale. Thanks to the Management Committee for all their hard work over many years.

One issue that our officers and contractors are having to grapple with is the amount of fly-tipping on Council sites from adjoining residents. This is not a victimless crime as we then have to remove the debris.

At Manor Fields the Council assisted the Allotments Society with their project to provide raised beds for disabled gardeners and complete their new fencing. Work to improve the muddy link from this site to the bypass path is imminent. Again, costs for this were met by successful S106 applications.

I would be remiss in not mentioning the issue of the two oak trees at Willow Drive. This is a highly complex subject about which many feel very strongly. I will not go into the details as part of this report, suffice to say that the subject is ongoing.

You will notice in this report and if you visit the Council's website, that much of the work of councillors, staff and contractors goes towards maintaining and improving a huge amount of open spaces and facilities which benefit a large number of local residents.

The **FINANCE & GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE** continues to keep a close eye on the Council's finances. The Clerk will say more about this later, but in the financial year about to start, an average Band D property will contribute 4.97% per annum more to fund Parish Council services which equals 11.17 pence extra per week or £5.81 extra for the whole year.

People sometimes ask why some projects take so long. The Council could raise your precept to pay for many of the projects it undertakes on your behalf, which might help to bring projects to fruition sooner. However, as previously mentioned, the Council is very pro-active in applying for S106 funds from Horsham District Council to fund projects. This reduces the burden on local tax-payers but can mean that projects can take longer as the funding application process can be complex and time consuming. Since 2019, the Council has successfully obtained £487,896 from S106 funds towards local projects.

The Depot at 83a High Street, is gradually getting more use for youth-orientated activities. Weekly formal youth sessions will start in April, funded by the Council. The Council hopes to lift a planning restriction so that the space can be used for non-youth groups also, in order to increase usage. The Council continues to fund the very popular youth boxing sessions held at The Weald School, which Billingshurst Lions also support.

The Council reviewed its grant application process this year and considered applications on two occasions. However, take-up was poor and we considered a whole raft of applications on a third occasion last week. A full list of all grants awarded is on the website.

The Council was recently pleased to learn from WSCC that our Community Highway Scheme bid for a 20mph limit in the High Street from West Street to Hilland roundabout, plus some adjoining roads has now been forwarded to the Highway Improvements Team. It is programmed for design this coming financial year 2026/27 and delivered as part of the works programme in 2027/28. The Council has been happy to support successful applications from residents to lower speed limits between Billingshurst and Adversane and through Adversane

itself. The Council is often approached by residents who would like to see vehicle volume and speeds reduced in the parish. Some would like to see more robust measures to address such things, but the Parish Council's powers are limited, and we can only lobby WSCC who has the final say as to what can or cannot be done.

Billingshurst Community Speedwatch Group continues to do excellent work and always needs more volunteers. Anyone interested in becoming a Speedwatch volunteer or wishing to know a little more about the scheme may telephone the administrator on 07768 081745. Alternatively, residents may join the local group by going online www.communityspeedwatch.org and clicking on the "register" icon and follow the joining instructions.

The **WORKING PRACTICES COMMITTEE** meets quarterly to consider staffing matters and keep various policies under review.

The Council organises and/or supports several **EVENTS** which help bring the community together:

- The Billingshurst Showcase, showcasing all the many groups and societies in the parish which will be held on Saturday 11 April.
- In the summer holidays, on 8 August, we plan to repeat last year's Family Activity Day at Jubilee Fields, working with our Neighbourhood Wardens.
- The Council continues to undertake the administration for the Annual Remembrance Day Parade working with the Royal British Legion. It is an enormous honour to lay a wreath on behalf of the people of Billingshurst at the event. On this subject we were very sad to hear of the death of the local President Colin Banks last week. Colin and the Billingshurst Royal British Legion Branch has been a great friend and supporter of the Parish Council on countless occasions over the years and will be truly missed by all of us who had close connections with him; Colin was the epitome of the word gentleman.
- Last year, in recognition of the 80th anniversaries, we lit the beacon at Adversane Green to mark VE Day and co-hosted an evening in Station Road Community Gardens with the Royal British Legion to mark VJ Day.
- The Council contributes to the firework display at Jubilee Fields to help ensure that this popular community event can continue to take place.

The **BILLINGSHURST CENTRE COMMITTEE** continues to meet monthly to oversee the Billingshurst Centre of which the Parish Council is the Sole Managing Trustee (and meets as Trustee approximately 6 times per year.)

The Council was sorry to lose long-standing Manager Sarah Newell last Spring, but was delighted to welcome an excellent replacement in Dan Fox who now leads the team and has already made a very positive mark.

Bookings are on the up, and a new website which also shows room availability to potential hirers has finally launched. In early December, the Centre hosted a fantastic Christmas Fayre which is a highlight of the village year and always very well attended. The Friday Coffee Mornings which the Centre host and which are staffed by our Neighbourhood Wardens, have become a permanent fixture in the weekly social life of the village. A local resident offered to help sponsor a new Union Flag at front of the Centre, so thanks to them for their generosity.

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A committee which very rarely appears in Annual Reports is the Council's **COMPLAINTS COMMITTEE**. Parish Councils like any local authority cannot please all of the people, all of the time and sometimes controversial and difficult decisions need to be made. It is also sometimes the case that parish councils get blamed for things which the district or county councils do or indeed don't do! Hopefully the fact that the Complaints Committee has not needed to meet for many years, and the fact that officers and councillors receive very few negative comments from parishioners, means that a huge majority of residents feel that we get things right most of the time and feel well served by the Council.

The Council continues to fully fund the Neighbourhood Warden Scheme, and last Spring we were sorry to say goodbye to Maria Colenso. Ross Phillips took her place, joining Louisa Hull, both of whom are very experienced, having been wardens elsewhere in the Horsham District. The Wardens' monthly updates are posted on the Council's website highlighting their activities and the wide variety of the tasks they undertake.

Work on starting to install cameras as part our Public Realm CCTV is imminent. This will involve cameras being placed in 15 locations in the parish and is a project which has been

visited quite a few times over the years, with residents often asking why there are not cameras to help reduce crime and anti-social behaviour and bring any perpetrators to book. This is a long-term project, and even when the current installations are completed, the Council will continue to monitor the number and location of cameras to ensure they bring maximum benefit to our growing and changing community.

The Council has been working closely with Horsham District Council on taking forward some exciting infrastructure projects under the Better Billingshurst banner. These are being funded by HDC but many projects will take place on Parish Council land. Please keep an eye on Council agendas, on the Council's social media and in the Village Tweet for further updates.

This Council decided to not take a view on whether the reorganisation of local government should take the form of one or two new councils in West Sussex. However, we have expressed an interest in taking on several play areas, bus shelters, land at Cedars Farm and car parking from Horsham District Council.

I would like to thank the Council's staff for all their hard work. These include the Clerk and his team in the Parish Office, the Billingshurst Centre Manager and his team and the Council's Environmental Operatives. On the latter, we said goodbye to Colin Ellis and Mike Ellis last year and have recently welcomed David Harris who joins John Bicknell.

Please consider following the Council's social media accounts on X, Facebook and Instagram or otherwise sign up to the Council's email subscription service. You can do this by visiting the Newsfeed section of the Parish Council's website and following the instructions on the section relating to E-Newsletter sign-up. It also only takes a few moments each week to visit the Council's website to see if any new agendas have been added and what items are due to be discussed and decided upon. The excellent local Village Tweet magazine also includes monthly updates from the Council in the centre page spread. I know many parishioners have a real interest and passion for matters relating to Billingshurst and the Parish Council offers more ways than ever to be kept updated, as do HDC and WSCC. The Council works closely with our District and County Councillors and has representation on a number of other local groups.

Finally, it has been an enormous honour and privilege to serve as Council Chairman in the past year, and at other times in the past 20-years or so. In May this year, we enter the final year of

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this Council's current term, with an election due in May 2027. Please consider standing as a councillor then, or if any casual vacancies arise beforehand. In the coming years we are bound to see more development and the population of Billingshurst is likely to grow further. The Parish Council is likely to be expected to take over the responsibility of a number of current HDC assets, and some of the new facilities which the Better Billingshurst project, and any future development brings, so it is more important than ever that Billingshurst Parish Council remains at full strength as much as possible to help guide and manage the inevitable changes that are to come.

PMB

APPENDIX B

REPORT OF THE RESPONSIBLE FINANCIAL OFFICER 2025-26

The Chairman has already reported on the changes to the amount of council tax the Parish Council will be demanding of residents in the coming year, so I thought I would mention some other highlights.

1. The Council received no Community Infrastructure Levy or CIL money last year.
2. The Council has continued to spend the considerable commuted sum it received following the transfer of Public Open Space (POS) at Kinslea Farm or Longhurst Drive on significant capital projects for the benefit of the parish. These include the imminent parish-wide CCTV, a fund for major repairs of play equipment, and the completion of the replacement of bollards around Adversane Green which I understand has been finished today.
3. The Council continues to support the Billingshurst Centre Charity with a revenue grant and one-off grants for specific items. It has agreed to fund the refurbishment of the rest of the green chairs, which we know from users is a high priority. This work is due to start next week you will be pleased to hear. It goes without saying that the fees that the Centre generates struggle to meet the cost of running it, especially as the cost of keeping it compliant with ever increasing regulatory standards is challenging.
4. This coming year's budget does include £9,000 to allow regular term time youth sessions to start up once again. This is being taken from reserves in year one to see how it goes.
5. We have taken the opportunity through retirement and departures to reduce the team of Environmental Operatives, from 98 hours per week to 74, by outsourcing weekly playground inspections. This should save money.
6. The Council is audited twice per year and continues to receive clean bills of health for the way it conducts its affairs.
7. As usual, I am very pleased to take any questions.

GCB