

ESTABLISHED 1894

Evenwood and Barony Parish Council

Annual Parish Meeting

Chairman's Annual Report

2025 -2026

Cllr. R C Bolden, FIAT, TMIQ.

WELCOME to Evenwood and Barony Parish Council's Annual Report. I cannot believe that a year has passed since I last sat down to review the Council's performance. Once again, I wish to give a huge thank you to all the councillors who have, over the past twelve-months, offered advice, come up with great solutions to problems, and completed a number of projects. It is always unwise to single out individuals, but I would like to thank my vice-chair – Councillor Rachael Spraggon - who once again has been a great support and proved extremely helpful when dealing with some awkward problems. A parish council, not to mention its chairman, cannot function without a good clerk and Responsible Finance Officer (RFO) and Evenwood and Barony Parish Council (EBPC) is extremely fortunate to have our current clerk and RFO. He has continued to offer wise counsel and act a source of valuable information, while all the time remaining steadfastly impartial. His expertise, professionalism, while remaining calm under pressure, has been a great benefit to the Council over the past year. I would also like to thank the chairs and members of the various working groups for all their hard work over the last twelve months. At the conclusion of the local elections last year (May 2025), the Parish Council was left with several vacancies to fill. Over the last twelve months, we have managed to fill, through the co-option process, all but one of the vacant seats - Witton ward – and we continue to endeavour to bring our council up to full strength. My sincere thanks to all those who have stepped forward to fill the vacancies and I hope that all of you who have agreed to volunteer on behalf of the communities that we serve have a long and enjoyable experience with the Parish Council. It is worth pointing out that parish councillors are volunteers and do not receive any payment whatsoever for the work they do.

The Parish Council has been extremely active during the last year. As well as our routine monthly meetings, we have held extra meetings for the working groups and separate meetings for the Randolph Social Welfare Centre charity's trust board. Various events have also been held which have allowed the Parish Council and the residents to work together. In May 2025, we commemorated the 80th Anniversary of VE (Victory in Europe) Day. In November 2025, we joined in services of remembrance, which once again were extremely well attended.

It would be remiss of me if I failed to mention all the good work that is carried out in the parish every year by the various volunteer groups within the villages and hamlets that the council serves; their good works are much appreciated. Finally, a mention to the local press (Teesdale Mercury) who have diligently reported the Parish Council's deliberations to the wider public.

On being elected chairman two years ago, I stated that I am naturally a '*policies and procedures'* type of person and, to that end, I have attempted to bring more structure to our method of operation. Therefore, I thank you all for bearing with me through some of the more tortuous aspects of these proceedings. At the same time, I identified three areas where I believed that the Parish Council could improve the way we operated. The Council has made very good progress to completing these targets as follows:-

1. **Management of the allotments:** A working group was set up with clear terms of reference in order to manage day-to-day issues and to compile and manage the waiting lists. It is fair to say that this is now contributing to the smooth management of our allotments. Allotment holders will have noted that the cost of their allotments has risen steadily over the last two years and is due to increase again next year. This is the result of a decision taken three years ago. After many years without an increase in rents, our rents had fallen way behind those of comparable sites. Whereas it is acknowledged that keeping prices 'as low as possible for as

long as possible' is a good thing, the down side of this policy is that eventually corrective action has to be taken and when it is it can be exceedingly difficult for all concerned. A further downside is that artificially low rents mean that there is little or no money to spend on maintenance and renewal. As a result of decisions taken by the current parish council, we now have a situation whereby all of this year's rental income will be used for maintenance works at the allotments and the rents will remain at a realistic level in future. We have already replaced the water supply at Delaware Avenue allotments and undertaken work to improve the access road. The Council approved a groundwork project which will provide parking at the Jubilee Terrace (Flatts) allotments. The tenancy agreements were modified to clarify the position regarding the use of allotments for the keeping of horses (Equine Allotments).

2. **Draw a clear boundary between the Parish Council and the Randolph Social Welfare Centre [charity number: 520785]:** This work has been completed successfully, with separate bank accounts, management accounts, meetings, and insurance all in place for the Welfare Ground in place.

3. **Improve communications with parishioners:** In early summer 2025, we got our new web-site up and running which has been worth the effort. What set out as a simple update and refresh exercise turned into a more complex exercise that involved the commissioning of a completely new web-site, operating on the required *.gov.uk* domain. However, we now have a professional and up-to-date web-site, which will be kept up-to-date and relevant. This new system provides all councillors with a dedicated email addresses for use on parish council business only, which allows for increased security and traceability over the previous system of using councillors' own private email addresses. An official Facebook page has also been set up from scratch to improve communications.

   The Parish Council lodged a formal objection to the planning application for Kays Hall Farm, The Green, Evenwood. We expressed concern about the safety of any new access road, described by local residents as a "death trap". Most important of all, it means that a 'new' access road would be driven across the village green, thus destroying it as an amenity for use by village residents. Unfortunately, the planning officers at Durham County Council were not convinced by our arguments and chose to approve the plans. That certainly does not mean that we have given up the fight. We are currently exploring at least two other avenues on which we can fight the proposal to desecrate our ancient village green.

   The Parish Council is pressing for measures to be taken to urgently address concerns about road safety issues and individual councillors have been in discussions with representatives of Durham Constabulary with a view to starting a "*Speed Watch"* scheme to tackle speeding issues. The Parish Council takes anti-social behaviour every bit as seriously as the public does and we continue to devote significant time to addressing the problems described by local residents. Vandalism is a crime that has a big impact on residents' quality of life and costs local council tax payers thousands of pounds to repair.

   In November 2025, the Council set its budget for the financial year next year 2026-2027. This is a significant task for councillors which is not taken lightly. My view has always been that the Council does not have any money of its own; it is the residents' money that we spend on their behalf and therefore it has to be spent with great care and due diligence. Within that budget, the Parish Council sets aside a modest sum of money each year to donate to good causes in

the parish as either a grant or a donation. The money must be spent on purposes which "*will bring direct benefit to the area or any part of it or all or some of its inhabitants*". The level at which we set that sum of money is governed by legislation i.e. the Local Government Act. The absolute limit allowed by law for Evenwood and Barony Parish Council is just under £20,500 based on the size of the local population. As a result, we were unable to acquiesce to a request from the Randolph Community Centre (RCC) for a grant of £35,000 no matter how much we may have wanted to. In order to ensure that all the other charitable groups within the Parish (including the RCC) got a fair share of the funds legally available a reduced figure of £5,000 was offered to the RCC. Our offer was rejected, rather ungraciously, out of hand.

We still managed to set a realistic and balanced budget. During this last year, we have purchased and installed three new defibrillators: one at the Welfare Ground, one (long awaited) at Ramshaw; and one at Evenwood Gate, as a result of the hard work and attention to detail carried out by the Parish Council at November's budget meeting, and more work is planned. The Council's reserves have been increased to improve future resilience and the level of local tax (the precept) from residents has been cut on average by just over 6%. We are reportedly the only parish council in County Durham to have achieved a planned cut in the tax burden.

The Parish Council holds its monthly meetings at the Cornerstone Christian Centre, Swan Street, Evenwood, and time is allocated at the beginning of each meeting for members of the public to raise questions or concerns relating to the Parish Council's role and responsibilities. I would like to sincerely thank Pastor Andrew Kay and his committee for their hospitality and help throughout the past year.



Councillor Robert (Bob) Bolden, FIAT, TMIQ.

Chairman

Evenwood and Barony Parish Council

12th May 2026