



## **Chair's Annual Report 2022-2023**

### **Background**

Elections in May 2022, saw the return of 7 Independent and 2 Labour Parish Councillors, which meant that Independents had a majority on the Parish Council for the first time. I was honoured to be elected to the role of Chair

### **Aims and Objectives**

In accordance with the election campaign, the newly formed Parish Council set out to:

1. Improve openness and transparency with the public, to encourage greater engagement with local residents;
2. Act as the voice of Billinge people, listening to their concerns, and seeking to lobby on their behalf with decision-makers;
3. Increase the number and variety of activities and events to support local residents, whilst supporting the existing range of activities and events;
4. Work collaboratively with others on matters of mutual concern; developing partnership working wherever possible

### **Openness and Transparency**

The Parish Council has opened up its processes to help local residents access the Parish Council through:

- Publishing the draft minutes (as well as the agenda) in advance of the meeting;
- Publishing the non-confidential papers in advance of the meeting;
- Adopting an encouraging approach to the public sessions in meetings, to facilitate questions;
- Adding an Action Log of items being followed up (also published);
- Holding Parish Council Surgeries on a fortnightly/monthly basis;
- Meeting with local residents outside of Parish Council meetings to listen to their issues and concerns

## **Acting as the voice of Billinge Residents**

Over the last 12 months this has led to a considerable amount of time and activity to work on behalf of local residents. Examples include:

**Library closure** - tackling the threat of the long-term closure of Billinge Library, and identifying options for the future. This included:

- Completing a survey of all households about what people want from a Library;
- Establishing a Library Community Project Group to look at alternatives for provision;
- Working with partners to establish temporary short-term provision e.g. Eddleston Trust and Book Cycle

**Flooding on Brownheath Avenue and Powell Drive** - through working with local residents we have sought to bring some accountability and responsiveness to try and prevent future flooding incidents. This has included:

- Keeping pressure on St Helens Council - specifically in their role as Local Lead Flooding Authority;
- Securing a Section 19 Report in accordance with legal requirements;
- Through St Helens Council ensuring preventative work and maintenance is undertaken by Nugent Care Society

**Monitoring the progress at the Billinge Medical Practice.** The GP Surgery had exceptionally low ratings from surveys and this was backed up by many worrying stories from the public regarding their treatment, or getting access to treatment. The CQC (Care Quality Commission) reported that the service was graded Inadequate in August 2022. Action has included:

- Holding regular meetings with St Helens Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), latterly known as St Helens Integrated Care Board (ICB)
- Joining Billinge Surgery Patient Group to engage with the staff and communicate issues;
- Participate in Open Events held by the Surgery to engage with patients and others

**Highlighting Road Safety concerns.** There have been number of issues raised with the Parish Council such as:

- **Pedestrian Crossing near Pingot Road** this was raised by a visually impaired member of the public and is currently being investigated by the Highways Department St Helens Council to see if a crossing is possible;
- **Car Parking by Nugent School staff along Carr Mill Road** that increases the risk of accidents;
- **Speeding on several major roads in Billinge.** The Police have supported several community volunteers to get trained to take part in speed gun checks, and the Police are introducing speed checks at present
- **Junction design at Main Street and Upholland Road** that is leading to cars bumping into walls. This is currently being addressed by the Highways Department
- **Parking along Roby Well Way** when groups use the football pitches at Eddleston Fields. This is being discussed with Eddleston Trust to seek to get their car park extended to relieve this pressure

## **Activities and Events**

This has been a busy year for events, and the election of younger Parish Councillors added a new dimension to discussions and activities, which was very much welcomed. Some of the new activities included:

- Supported Billinge Community Music group, providing free music lessons to children of all ages;
- Sponsored a Christmas Tree at St Aidans Church;
- Supported the Open Mike Night that raised funds for repairing the organ at St Aidans;
- Provided a Book Hutch at the Millennium Garden and Dam Slacks Play Area to exchange books;
- Delivered several Litter Picks, to support the Queen's Platinum Jubilee;
- Supported the new community group, Billinge in Bloom that seeks to make the village attractive;
- Organising the Volunteer Awards as part of the King's Coronation celebrations;
- Tree work at the Millennium Garden to make the garden safer and open up the area;
- Supporting the Residents Association with their Picnic in the Park celebration events.

In addition, the Parish Council supported the regular activities of:

- The lighting of the Beacon for the Jubilee celebrations;
- The Children's Remembrance Service, which was attended by over 100 primary and nursery school pupils from Billinge and Garswood. This included poppies on lampposts;
- Supported the Business Christmas decoration competition, with Willowbrook Charity Shop winning the 2022 trophy;
- Organised the Christmas Poster competition for local school children;
- Supported the Mayor and Residents Association in the Christmas Tree lighting

## **Progress to date and Future Plans**

### **Openness and Transparency**

The Parish Council has been largely successful in this task. We now need to remain open and accessible to the public. Not all Parish Councillors agreed to do the Councillor Surgery sessions, but all the Independent Councillors have delivered them. The Councillor Surgeries have had a mixed response, with many sessions getting few or no members of the public attending. However, we have had around 20-25 people attend such sessions and raise many of the concerns noted above. The Parish Council will continue to deliver such sessions for the next 6 months but will seek to raise awareness of the sessions more effectively.

### **Acting as the voice of Billinge residents**

As the Parish Council has limited powers, we have undertook to lobby organisations who have the power and authority to address residents' concerns. We have had limited success, and at times these activities have been frustrating. However, we have had some success, although most areas are still a work in progress, which we will continue to work on, on behalf of local residents. Specifically:

- We hope to see a temporary solution to the Library closure within the next 6 months, by working closely with the Eddleston Trust and Book Cycle, through the Library Community Project Group;
- We expect to see the publication of a Section 19 Report by the end of May 2023 (a full 17 months after the flooding event) on the Flooding in Brownheath Avenue and Powell Drive;
- We now expect the re-Inspection by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) of Billinge Medical Practice to take place in the summer, and there have been significant improvements since the previous inspection in August 2022;
- Road Safety - this has been a challenging area to secure progress, but we are currently working with the Highways Department in St Helens Council on a number of areas.

## **Activities and Events**

This has been a successful part of the Parish Council work, and the injection of enthusiasm and ideas of new Parish Councillors and their energy and linking with members of the public has been really good this year. We want to engage with local residents to have as many activities as possible to meet their needs.

Other notable activities include working with the VCA and St Aidans Church to support initiatives to help with the cost of living crisis. The Chair's allowance was split between the VCA, St Aidans Church and the Hope Centre food bank, to help those in greatest need.

## **Collaboration and Partnership Working**

Through many of the events described the Parish Council has sought to work in partnership, and to collaborate where our interests meet. Examples of this include:

- St Helens Council
- Eddleston Trust
- Nugent School and Nugent Care
- St Helens Volunteer and Community Association
- Primary Schools in Billinge
- Local businesses in Billinge
- St Aidans Church
- St Helens Integrated Care Board (formally the Clinical Commissioning Group)
- Billinge Surgery

Through working together organisations can usually achieve far more. However, we have to recognise that sometimes interests may diverge, and this can lead to conflict. For example, the Parish Council took out a complaint against St Helens Council with regard to the flooding issue. Despite our best efforts we have made little progress on the car parking issue on Carr Mill Road by Nugent School staff.

## **Summary**

It has been a very busy year and I want to thank all those volunteers and organisations who are working hard to improve the situation for Billinge residents. I also wish to thank the Residents Association for their tireless work for the village.

I have enjoyed working with my fellow Parish Councillors, and also the Borough Councillors who help to support our efforts. Unfortunately, two Parish Councillors resigned this year, Stuart Wainwright and Anna Armstrong. They had helped bring fresh perspectives and energy to our work, and they will be missed. We welcome Frank Gill and Malcolm Webster who have joined the Parish Council as their replacements.

Finally, I want to place on record my thanks to our Parish Clerk, Hazel Broatch, who is highly skilled, hard-working, and supportive. I could not have done my role without her.

Steve Gardner  
Chair