

SOUTH SWINDON PARISH COUNCIL

ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

Minutes of the meeting held on 25 March 2025 at 7.15pm
At Council Chamber, Parish Offices, Gladstone Street, Swindon, SN1 2AU

Present	Cllr Neil Hopkins – Chair	Cllr Sam James
	Cllr Mike Davies	Cllr Linda Kasmaty
	Cllr Domingos Dias	Cllr Jamal Miah
	Cllr John Firmin	Cllr Graham Philpot
	Cllr Abdul Hamid	Cllr Tom Silberberg
	Cllr Patrick Herring	

Officers	Matt Leather	Deputy CEO
	Max Tanner	Committee Officer

Public None

1. Apologies

Cllr Rebecca Banwell-Moore
Cllr Saleh Ahmed
Cllr Junab Ali
Cllr Janine Howarth
Cllr Marianne Le Coyte-Grinney
Cllr Trish Philpot
Cllr Danial Vales
Cllr Nadine Watts

2. Minutes

It was RESOLVED To approve the minutes of the last Annual Parish Meeting held 25 March 2024.

3. Public Questions

There were no public questions.

4. Annual Report by the Chair of the Parish Council

As we near the end of the eighth year of the Parish Council we can reflect on our achievements over the previous years that led to the creation of one of the largest parish councils in the country (South Swindon Parish Council is now the 5th largest Parish/Town Council in England by value of precept). Through this period, we have developed a reputation for being a progressive organisation that has always sought to put the interests of the parishioners first.

This report serves as a reminder of the fantastic achievements by the parish, delivered in collaboration with dedicated councillors, officers, staff, volunteers and supporters.

This is my second Chair's APM report for the Parish. I have been a councillor for the 8 years, from when the Parish was created, and all those responsible should be very proud of what has been achieved in that short period during which the Parish always strived to put people first over politics at every opportunity.

To recap - in the short lifespan of the Parish, we have

- Saved two libraries from closure, and 2 years ago opened a third in the new Badbury Park Community Hub – Badbury Park Library has proved to be highly successful and was the first new library in Swindon in many years.
- Regenerated our formal parks, Town Gardens and Queens Park, after years of under-investment – this work continues through our excellent team of gardeners, and we have created large formal beds in GWR Park that are maintained by our team. This coming year we hope initiate to make further significant improvements through an application for National Lottery Heritage Funding to repair the iconic Art Deco Bowl as part of a larger project to improve Town Gardens.
- Rebuilt and/or regenerated our 22 playgrounds that had suffered from many years of little or no investment. This coming year will see building start imminently on massive improvements at Buckhurst Fields including a new skateboard park and Play Zone (a new multi-use games area that will provide for a range of sports including volleyball) following re-instatement of the football pitches, and work, which is almost completed on the improvement and re-configuration of the changing rooms and. This is being achieved with funding from Nationwide, section 106 moneys and grants from the Football Foundation and Sport England.
- Saved Broadgreen Community Centre from closure. Two years ago we reached an innovative arrangement with the Harbour Project that has seen the Community Centre reach a very high level of utilisation, provided a much-improved home for the excellent work carried out by the Harbour Project and the centre now makes a surplus for the first time for many years.
- Invested heavily in GWR Park – 2 years ago, through working with partners including SBC, the National Trust and Historic England we created a blossom circle as a reflection of a long-lost bandstand and created new formal beds that have brought much needed colour and beauty to this historic park. Last year, we created a new base adjacent to GWR Park for our gardeners to operate from and additional gardening staff resource is now allocated to GWR Park.
- Increased ground maintenance and street cleaning and have recently supported SBC in the planting of trees in various areas of the Parish working with the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and Trees for Climate, with much more to come at sites across the Parish.
- Brought our 14 allotment sites back up to standard – this has included improvements to an access roadway at Glenwood Close allotments which was achieved with financial support from Nationwide. We will continue to improve our sites over the coming years. We are close to adding 2 additional sites in Badbury Park.

We could not have achieved this without our wonderful, dedicated staff and officers who have worked so hard in this time to deliver the vision of a people-first focused Parish. Our Parish employees are true stakeholders who understand the value of making the place in which we live and work the best it can be, and I am forever grateful to them and thank them for their constant support.

The Parish has played its part in supporting our staff, becoming the first in Wiltshire to be awarded The Living Wage Foundation accreditation. We ensure that we invest in people through training and progression, safeguarding and promoting wellbeing.

I would like to thank all the Councillors who, over the seven years, have contributed so much to the success of the Parish Council. In particular,

- Cllr Janine Howarth who has supported me, serving as Vice Chair last year and indeed as vice-chair from the very start of the Parish. Rebecca Banwell-

Moore has supported me as Vice-Chair this past year.

- Cllr Linda Kasmaty as Chair of Leisure and Amenities, who took over from me last year and has continued to deliver large projects from playground refurbishment to the fourth successive year of the fantastic Enchanted Gardens Light Trail but who has continued to lead on our South West in Bloom project working with numerous volunteer groups and organisations and has continued to Chair the Environment Working Party which lays down a path for continued improvements in our natural environment. For the past 2 years, we have achieved a Gold Award competing against some towns with a strong history of achievement in In Bloom.
- Councillors Patrick Herring and Sam James for chairing the Planning Committee.
- Cllr Dave Griffiths who has delivered many projects through his work on many of our key committees and working parties.
- Cllr John Firmin who took over as Chair of the Events Working Party last year and ensured a successful 4th year of the Enchanted Gardens Light Trail and has continued the work of creating an even wider variety of music, theatre, comedy, children's and community events many of which use our iconic Art Deco Town Gardens Bowl.

The fabric of what we have achieved is engraved in their dedication and determination to deliver.

I would also like to thank the many volunteers and partner organisations that have been so supportive in their selfless endeavours to ensure the Parish remains relevant in the community, guiding us in partnership, highlighting the needs of the local community. Being Chair has given me the opportunity and privilege to meet so many wonderful people who contribute so much of their time and energy to vital local initiatives and causes and have become a cornerstone of what the Parish represents.

This year has seen the Parish deliver:

- A second GOLD award for In-Bloom - the highest award so far - and a brilliant result bearing in mind the urban nature of the Parish, competing in the Champion of Champions section with the likes of Truro and Paignton. In addition, our volunteers also received recognition for the many In Your Neighbourhood entries across the Parish.
- Continued improvements at the Cambria Bridge Garden project working with many local volunteers.
- Blossom festivals at Shaftesbury Lake, East Wichel and Buckhurst Tiny Forests, Town Gardens, Badbury Park Library and GWR Blossom Circle. Town Gardens was featured on regional TV news programmes due to its exceptional beauty during the cherry blossom period
- Brass Band concerts at Queens Park
- The delivery of over 80 events including over 70 in Town Gardens, many of these events support local community groups and charities.
- A wide range of entertainment at the Town Gardens Bowl to suit all tastes from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" to Queen, ABBA and Elton John Tribute Bands, a Comedy Night and specialised children's events
- Many fantastic Brass Band concerts at the Town Gardens Bandstand

through the Summer

- Further flower beds in GWR park planned and planted by our gardeners.
- Various library events throughout the summer run by our superb library staff
- The Parish Front Garden Competition run for its 4th year in conjunction with the CO-OP.
- Support the Canal Path Vegetable Garden volunteer create new plots.
- Fantastic workshops for young people delivered by Prime Theatre in the Town Gardens Bowl for the 4th year.
- Support grants for a number of local community groups and charities.
- Several free bike marking events in conjunction with Wiltshire Police at Cavendish Square
- The 4th Enchanted Garden Light Trail, welcoming 23,000 visitors this year and raising money for the local NHS charity – Brighter Futures
- 3 Christmas trees were again installed this year with fantastic community attendance at Cavendish Square with a lights switch-on event that included carol singing from local schools, at Badbury Park Community Hub in partnership with local residents and at Broadgreen with a lights switch-on event that included carol singing from the local community.
- The 2nd year of the Blossom event at GWR park in partnership with Historic England and the National Trust.
- Installation of the Old Town Christmas lights and working with the dynamic Old Town Business Association to assist in delivering another fantastic light switch on event and their other events such as the Food festival/Sausage and Ale Trail.
- A completed carving of a statue of Sir Daniel Gooch from an old tree in GWR Park
- The drainage improvements to the Quarry Road Tennis that was required to address flooding issues that we have encountered after the initial works. These tennis courts are already very well-used.

All these projects were delivered in parallel to our day-to-day duties of:

- Grass Cutting
- Shrub and Hedge maintenance
- Tree Maintenance (from ground using hand tools only)
- Emptying Bins
- Litter Picking
- Street Cleaning
- Dead animal collection on public land
- Hypodermic needle collection on public land
- Graffiti removal
- Small scale fly tipping

- Libraries
- Youth Work
- Events
- Allotments
- Play area maintenance

The parish has also had to overcome challenges such as the invasive duckweed problem at Queens Park that was exacerbated by the unseasonal weather, and the loss of fish due to oxygen depletion. We continue to work with the Environment Agency and specialists to address the issues which are exacerbated by a significant build up of excess nutrients in the lake. The treatment of the lake at Queens Park is to reduce the silt and we have added pumps to fight the effects of the oxygen crash that killed many fish. Further treatments will continue for several years address the issues and will be carefully monitored.

The Parish will go from strength to strength, with many exciting new projects in the pipeline, such as community outdoor sports facilities in Parks and Walcot, refurbishment of the Town Gardens and the Bowl to support an extensive events program.

It has been an honour and privilege to continue to serve the Parish Council and local residents.

Neil Hopkins

Chair

South Swindon Parish Council

4. Financial Report by the Chief Executive Officer

The financial year will end 31st March 2025 and the final accounts are not yet ready or audited but a brief overview can be provided here.

The Parish Council received a precept of £3,275,350 for 2024-25. The Parish Council also continued to receive a Precept Support Grant of £56,491 although it should be noted that this will not be available in the coming year. The precept for 2025-26 has been set at £3,525,585.

The Parish Council received £84,329 of outstanding Community Infrastructure Levy during the year.

The largest cost centre accounting for Parish Council budgeted expenditure is the in-house provision of Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleaning at 33% of budgeted expenditure. The remaining budget is broken down as follows –

- Administration – 16%
- Grants & Parish Events – 12%
- Town Gardens – 7%
- Queens Park – 5%
- General Maintenance – 8%
- Play Areas – 4%
- Loan Repayment – 3%
- Parish Depot – 2%
- Old Town Library – 2%
- Youth Development – 1%

- Allotments – 1%
- Broadgreen Community Centre – 1%
- Badbury Park Library 1%
- Badbury Park Community Hub 1%
- GWR Park – 1%
- Parish Office – 1%

Subject to approval of the accounts at year end, the Council hold reserves of about £2.9million of which general reserves were £792,235 and is at the correct level recommended by the National Association of Local Councils of 3 months net revenue expenditure.

Within the reserves are funds set aside for -

- Capital replacement programme for vehicles and machinery
- Play Area refurbishment/replacement equipment
- Funding for QP Hot House and TG Bowl works
- Emergency Tree Works Fund
- Youth Funding
- Enchanted Gardens Light Trail Funding
- Election Costs
- Allotment Improvements
- Section 106 Receipts
- Buckhurst Field Improvements

The parish council has continued to invest into its property and assets with the following replacements, improvements or purchases being made –

Play Area Refurbishment £176,025
 Mesothelioma Garden £44,149
 GWR Park Gardeners Building £66,559
 New Van £19,450
 The Bowl Refurbishment £26,055
 Broadgreen 'The Hut' Refurbishment £7,849
 Quarry Road Tennis Courts Drainage £53,090
 Parish Office New Windows £16,453
 Badbury Park Community Hub Fitout £105,665
 Buckhurst Regeneration Project £183,901
 Shrewsbury Road Pavilion £55,134

The Parish Council keeps £2.3 million of funds in a diversified investment portfolio with priorities of security, liquidity and finally, return.

It remains the case that none of the Parish Council investments are exposed to any of the current conflicts and are not being used to fund these.

The last internal audit report for the Council concluded –

“We are pleased to advise that, based on the work undertaken for the year to date, no issues were identified to require any further attention at present and no Action Plan is considered necessary.”

The year-end internal and external audit reports will be brought to a Full Council meeting as soon as they are available.

Jake Mee FMAAT Chief Executive Officer
 Central Swindon South Parish Council

5. **Finance & Staffing Committee Report**

A brief update on staffing within the parish council as finances have already been covered. Since the last Annual Parish Meeting in 2024 the council has maintained its staffing levels and created a new role for a Community Development Officer. The

council is made up of two distinct arms –
Admin & Community Services Administration & Finance Libraries
Youth Work Planning Community Centres Events
Community Development

Outside Services Grounds Maintenance Street Cleaning

Play Maintenance General Maintenance Park Gardeners Allotments

There are 17 staff working with the Council's Admin and Community Services Team and 43 staff within the Outside Services Team.

The parish council is committed to eliminating all forms of discrimination, and actively promotes equality of opportunity for everyone in its employment and service delivery. The council has been a proud 'Real Living Wage' employer since 2018 and has adopted the National Joint Council Pay Scales.

A pay multiple is defined as the ratio between the highest paid taxable earnings for the given year and the median earnings figure of the whole of the authority's workforce. South Swindon Parish Council's pay multiple remains at 1:2.91

The ongoing cost of living crisis has resulted in a massive strain on the staffing budget with an average pay lift of 6% across the workforce. The impact of this over last year and 2024/25 is almost £250k. The majority of this increase in 2024/25 was absorbed by a 5% budgeted increase and a 5% contingency. The increase has been budgeted for in 2025/26 as 5% increase with 5% contingency.

In all cases with a small team delivering a diverse and great range of services for so many people the flexibility of the team and their passion for the work they do is to be commended and we look forward to another year of delivering on our promise to improve the lives of our residents.

6. Leisure, Environment & Amenities Report

The Leisure, Environment and Amenities committee work together with officers, ground staff and other parish councillors to make sure South Swindon Parish a great place to live, whether it's play areas, parks or big projects like the Town Gardens Bowl refurbishment.

We were keen to identify the boundaries of the parish and commissioned 6 Gateway signs which were placed at the main routes into the parish. A friend visiting last week saw these and commented on how impressive they were, a keen gardener, she was pleased to see the reference to the parish being Bloom winners.

A group of 10 community gardeners were very pleased to attend the 60th celebrations of southwest in Bloom in Bath in October and receive our second Gold award reflecting excellence in horticulture, community gardening and sustainable practices. Our Achilles heel is graffiti and we must make sure we improve our strategy for dealing with it before our next judging in July.

It seems impossible to imagine how Aaron Hedges and his team of gardeners could improve Town Gardens, but the recently refurbished aviary now has two distinct sections for different sorts of birds and a mural was commissioned for the backdrop. The pond has also been cleaned out, paving around it repointed and the fountain cleaned and repainted black and gold. Several of the rose beds in the rose garden have been completely renovated involving digging out soil and roses and replacing both the soil and the roses to reduce the chance of infection being transmitted.

There is also a new information board at Town Gardens.

At Queen's Park £50,000 was spent this year on the mesothelioma garden making a really beautiful place for reflection. We had a ribbon cutting to open the garden and congratulated Richard Pinchon, Head Gardener at Queen's Park for his innovative design and planting scheme for the garden.

At GWR Park the gardener base opened this year, there's new interpretation signage across the park, a mural on electricity substation and tree carving featuring Daniel Gooch. Charlotte Jones has been allocated two days to look after the park, and this has made a real difference to the quality of planting in the park. However there has been a lot of damage caused in the park by dogs, and Charlotte has

suggested we could fence off some of the flower beds to protect them and have a dog free area in the park. This is harking back to the old days when there was some substantial fencing around the flower beds.

At Broadgreen an Improvement Plan is currently being implemented including window replacement, cladding replacement (upcoming), Community centre entrance door replacement (upcoming) and an improvement to public realm around Broadgreen campus. We have spent quite a bit of time discussing the ill-fated bollard at the entrance to the car park.

The Tree Nursery @ Westcott Allotment- project led by Wiltshire Wildlife Trust has been more or less completed now with additional planting probably needed at some stage. Plot holders at Westcott Allotment site will soon be able to pick fruit from the trees planted there and use the sticks grown there for harvesting.

Refurbishment of the Broadgreen Hut (now called the "Hutti") with Changing Suits leasing the building has taken place.

We were pleased to see the opening of Quarry Rd Tennis Courts- total cost of project, including drainage work nearly £200K with £94K provided by LTA. There has been an agreement of a new Youth Strategy with two Youth Clubs setup in Parks and Eastcott.

We are celebrating Town Gardens 100th anniversary with a programme of events and new Blossom Festival event thanks to funding from £5K grant from the National Trust. This runs from 5-20 April.

This year has seen major investment at Buckhurst field which had been described as a 'green desert'. The skate park building began on 17.3.25 and we look forward to an excellent facility there as well as a refurbished play park and changing rooms. In 2024, the Parish Council hosted a variety of events throughout the Parish. This featured: a series of theatre, comedy, children's and music performances at the Town

Gardens Bowl, including My Dad's Bigger Than Your Dad Festival; the Blossom Festival; The Wave at Queen's Park; Shaftesbury Lake Wildlife Discovery Day, and Badbury Park Easter and Summer events. Over the festive season, the Parish Council

hosted Christmas Tree Light Switch Ons at Broadgreen Community Centre, Badbury Park Community Hub and Cavendish Square in November, as well as the Enchanted

Gardens Light Trail in December. These parish-run events have been supplemented by a range of private bookings in the parks, including Swindon and Wiltshire Pride and

the Nepalese Cultural Festival in GWR Park, the Polish Festival in Queen's Park and the Great West Fest in the Town Gardens.

The Brighter Broadgreen project has seen a lot of activity from police and community workers to improve the area. There was a 'clear' phase, we're now in the 'hold' and will soon move to the 'build' phase.

The parish has just employed a Community Development Officer which we hope will open opportunities within the parish.

We continue to work with over 20 community gardening groups, and it has been a real pleasure to see them develop this year. Thinking in particular of the Angel Ridge Community Garden whose leader came to talk to our committee about the work they have been doing, and the benefits to the community. Our Bloom Steering Group is working well to support the It's Your Neighbourhood groups, run a Grower's Summit, organise Open Gardens and the Front Garden Competition. This year we have engaged with 4 schools to improve their outside area, run gardening clubs and generally excite children about the possibilities achieved through gardening.

I need to mention we have entered the Green Flag award for Town Gardens, thanks go to Martin Hambidge for pulling the information together and for Cllr Dave Griffiths for encouraging us.

Our Events Officer, Abi Garside-Scutts has put together a fantastic programme of

events for the 2025 season which I hope will be more readily accessible to all households via the new Parish Magazine.

The parish council continues to give excellent service whether it's in the well-used refurbished play areas, bin emptying, grass cutting, listening to suggestions and the other myriad of things they are involved in delivering. Thanks go to Jake Mee CEO and Matt Leather Deputy CEO who lead a magnificent team of officers, grounds maintenance, street cleaning and play area maintenance and thanks also go to the parish councillors who support these activities.

7. **Planning Committee Report**

The Planning Committee has met nine times over the course of the last year, which is once more than in the previous two years. Meetings of the Planning Committee are scheduled to take place once per month, in line with our statutory obligation to respond to planning applications within 21 days of being notified by the Borough Council. Two meetings were cancelled this year due to lack of planning applications of interest, and one additional meeting was scheduled as a result of a technical fault with the Borough Council's Planning Portal preventing councillors from reviewing applications in time for a scheduled meeting.

Our Parish Planning Protocol has our Planning Committee automatically discuss any applications which meet the threshold of being a "Large Application", whilst other applications are discussed at the request of Ward Parish Councillors, who may call in any applications for discussion which they feel are interesting, controversial, or where there is a public interest.

This year the Planning Committee has considered 24 planning applications.

The largest application discussed was for 262 homes on land at Newburn Sidings in Central Ward. This application has been examined several times since its first appearance in 2021 and generated a considerable amount of public interest.

The Planning Committee also responded to the three linked planning applications for development at North Star, including redevelopment of the Oasis Leisure Centre.

Although this site is outside of our Parish boundaries, there is a considerable public interest from our parishioners, and potential impacts on our residents and to our facilities, so it is right that we would also give our considerations to the proposals.

Other applications have ranged from residential conversions of existing commercial buildings, houses converted to HMOs, and redevelopment of historic buildings around the Carriageworks and Railway Village. One application, to create a new "Fan Zone" at the County Ground, saw the developer respond positively to our comments and the resulting development was greatly improved.

Outside of formal planning applications, the Planning Committee has also been pleased to have an opportunity to feed into the Swindon Borough Council's "Vision for the Heart of Swindon" proposal. The scale and scope of this vision should mean that the Planning Committee will be kept well occupied with new planning applications to consider for the years to come.

The Parish is grateful for the continued time and diligence from Parish Councillors on the Planning Committee in reviewing applications and providing valuable insights.

The Committee is also grateful to the Parish Officers for their knowledge and the vital support they provide in enabling the Committee to carry out its work.

Cllr Patrick Herring
Chair of Planning Committee

The meeting closed at 7:18pm

Signed.....

Date.....

Chair of the Council