City of Durham Parish Council – Chair's annual report 2025

I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in the work of the Parish Council since our last annual meeting of the parish. It is a real honour to serve as Chair of this Parish Council – one of only three Quality Award status Councils in our county - and to work alongside the great team of volunteer Councillors as I do.

An enormous thank you particularly to those Members who have recently retired after such wonderful, long and dedicated service to our community. We wish them all our sincere thanks and the very best of wishes for the future. In doing so, we also bid a warm welcome to our new Councillors, recently elected following the local elections earlier this month. All of them are in no doubt at all about the hard work and commitment needed as part of the work of this Parish Council.

I would stress that our community remains a wonderful place to live, work and visit and the sense of community spirit and amazing civic pride simply would not be possible without the extraordinary voluntary work of the many partnership organisations we work with day in, day out.

Environment Committee

As many of you will know, one of the Parish Council's key priorities has been to keep our community as clean, green, and pleasant as possible. It is clear that environmental quality is a central concern for many residents and our message today is that we share those concerns and are keen to address them.

Firstly, through our Service Level Agreement with Durham County Council, the Parish Council funds an additional 10 hours of enhanced Neighbourhood Warden time each week. This investment allows us to tackle local issues more effectively and respond more quickly to concerns raised by residents. Our dedicated Wardens, Kirk Thiis and Antony Waterson, do an outstanding job—whether its addressing problems with litter and bins, tackling low-level anti-social behaviour, or enforcing the Public Space Protection Order that helps manage street drinking in the city, nuisance begging and anti-social behaviour or dog fouling. Kirk and Ant also play a vital role in promoting the resident-led *"Shhh… 11pm to 7am"* campaign, encouraging late-night quiet in residential areas. From monitoring fly-tipping to supporting community initiatives, their presence on our streets makes a visible and valued difference every week. We will hear more about their work later this evening.

To support our ongoing efforts, two years ago the Parish Council also launched a voluntary contribution levy for local student landlords – an initiative we are continuing and designed to ensure that those who profit from rental properties also contribute to the upkeep of our shared community spaces.

The funds raised through this levy have allowed us to continue supporting key initiatives like the Green Move Out scheme and our Tidy Gardens campaign. These projects make a real difference—helping to reduce waste at the end of tenancies,

encouraging better upkeep of front gardens, and improving the look and feel of our neighbourhoods for everyone who lives here. It is a practical example of how targeted funding can deliver visible, lasting benefits in the places we all share.

The Parish Council has also put the environment at the heart of its fundraising efforts this last year too. In doing so, we are delighted to have contracted the services of Claire Murray-Kemp whose focus has been to help us secure funding for new green roof bus shelters—an innovative project that combines practical infrastructure with carbon capture and visual greening of the public realm. These bus shelters are planned for the Elvet and Lower Claypath areas of the parish, where we know air quality remains a significant concern. If successful, this initiative will not only improve the street environment but also contribute to tackling pollution in some of our most affected neighbourhoods. We are currently awaiting the outcome of a Section 106 funding bid, which we hope will provide the resources needed to bring this project to life.

At the same time, we have been lobbying our North East Mayor Kim McGuinness on the rollout of new low emission bus services for our City, mindful that a significant level of pollution in hotspot areas such as Church Street in Elvet comes from emissions from buses.

I would particularly like to thank the many volunteers who have worked with the Parish Council over the last year to help make our city greener and more beautiful. Your dedication has been truly inspiring—contributing to the planting of over 75,000 spring bulbs, hundreds of trees, and supporting our ongoing work as part of the Durham in Bloom initiative. Thanks to your efforts, Durham City was once again awarded the Gold Award for Best Small City at last year's Northumbria in Bloom Awards. We are absolutely delighted with this recognition, which is a testament to the pride, care, and hard work that so many people put into looking after our wonderful City.

We are equally delighted to support the work of the Wear Rivers Trust and the recently formed Durham City Riverscape Community groups. These dedicated groups of volunteers work tirelessly to combat invasive species, litter pick along the riverbanks and even within the River Wear itself—helping to protect our natural environment, support local wildlife, and enhance one of the most cherished parts of our city which forms part of the wider appreciation for our World Heritage Site. Their commitment and energy are truly commendable, and we look forward to working closely with them as they continue this vital contribution to the beauty and health of our riverscape.

We'll hear more about this later this evening so I won't steal Inspector Dave Clarke's thunder. However, the Parish Council continues to place a strong focus on community safety, working closely in partnership with Durham County Council and Durham Police to help keep our city safe and welcoming for everyone.

We are committing additional funding to support Operation Lentil, which provides extra police officers to Durham City throughout the year and provides a visible presence and reassurance to both residents and visitors.

We also remain one of the main funding partners for the Safety of Women at Night Hub – a desperately important initiative offering a safe space and practical help during the night-time hours.

Alongside this, we are continuing our funding for initiatives such as ShopWatch and the Durham City Street Friends, which bring together local businesses and volunteers to promote safety, prevent crime, and support vulnerable people. These initiatives reflect our deep commitment to building a safer, more caring city for all and we are really pleased at the noticeable impact of this investment as well as the introduction of the new Public Spaces Protection Order our Inspector Dave has championed.

I also wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the outstanding work of the Parish Council's Environment Committee, and in particular its Chair, Carole Lattin, who, together with a group of volunteer residents, has led on the development of the City of Durham Emergency Plan. This is a vital document which strengthens our community's resilience in the face of a range of potential emergencies. Thanks to Carole's leadership and the collaborative efforts of residents, local organisations, and the Civil Contingencies Unit, we now have a robust, community-focused plan that ensures we are better prepared, more informed and ready to support one another should the unexpected occur. An enormous thank you to you all.

Business Committee

The work of the Parish Council is perhaps never more visible than when we are out supporting and hosting events—and we are absolutely delighted to have played a part in some truly memorable occasions over the past year. We are proud once more to support the financing and delivery of some really iconic events in our City such as the Durham Fringe Festival – which this year marks its fifth anniversary - Durham Pride, the Children's Book Festival, our annual Christmas Festival, Uniformed Services Day, Lunar New Year and Durham Regatta, as well as some significant national commemorations including our annual Remembrance Day event, most recently the 80th anniversary of VE Day and so much more.

Most notably, we were honoured to play a small part in supporting the Royal Maundy Service, which saw Their Majesties The King and Queen attend a service at Durham Cathedral only last month, from dressing the City in bunting and blooms to putting on music entertainment and royal-themed food, the 17th April in our City was truly a day to remember.

These events bring people together, showcase the very best of our city, and remind us of the important civic role the Parish Council plays in the life of our community. Equally as important, they form the main tool at our disposal to increase footfall to our high street. Ultimately our aim is to drive increased footfall to the city, fill

our shops with thriving retailers and get money behind the tills of the businesses who are the lifeblood of our city.

This year we are going even further with this initiative and working directly with businesses on the delivery of events within their premises too through the launch of our Business Events grant fund and I would encourage all of our venues to take advantage of this additional funding.

Thanks also go to our retail consultant Graham Soult who this year has a significant focus on our behalf in filling empty units in our city.

Residents were most keen to express their thanks to the Parish Council too following our intervention to address the frontage of the upcoming STACK premises on Silver Street. We were delighted to partner with renowned photographer Graeme Hall in producing some iconic images of Durham alongside our colleagues at Durham BID and have these provide a special covering whilst internal works take place at the Silver Street premises.

Promoting and protecting the rich cultural heritage of our city is a core part of the Parish Council's work, and we continue to take that responsibility seriously. One of the most significant projects we have led on this year is the external restoration of the historic City Theatre building at Fowler's Yard. This much-loved venue is home to Durham Dramatic Society and has long been a cornerstone of our local arts scene. Through the work to gain planning consent and acquire the necessary external funding for the works, the Parish Council has not only helped to preserve an important piece of our built heritage within the Conservation Area, but also supported the future of grassroots theatre and cultural life in Durham; a really powerful example of how we can help safeguard the character of our city while enabling it to thrive.

This year we press on with a further heritage project that has really put our work on the map; that being our heritage blue plaque project. Over the last year we were delighted to focus on the amazing women's history of our City through our plaques celebrating the first female Professor of Durham University Professor Dame Rosemary Cramp as well as at 33 Claypath in our parish too - the site of considerable historical significance. 126 years ago, a Women's Hostel opened at this site to receive women who would go on to study for degrees at Durham University in the 1899/1900 academic year. It was the first opportunity for women to study on the same residential basis as men. The Women's Hostel was renamed in 1920 and would later become what we know today as St Mary's College.

Later this year, we will mark another significant individual in our City's history with a blue plaque; former Crossgate Councillor Sam Green. Sam is widely believed to be the first openly gay Councillor elected in England and the first openly gay candidate ever in an election in Great Britain. Sam's election to the City Council clearly broke a glass ceiling at a time when societal views on homosexuality were not as they are today and it is a point of great pride indeed for us that Durham City was the first place in Britain to elect an openly gay Councillor.

Planning Committee

What makes Durham so wonderful is its phenomenal World Heritage Site and our City's Conservation Area. As custodians of this medieval city of ours, it is incumbent on all of us to play our part to ensure that we cherish and preserve all that makes Durham City the great place it is.

Our Parish Council's Planning and Licensing Committee deals with literally hundreds of applications each year, involving the painstaking analysis of thousands of documents, technical drawings and much more. We are delighted to be supported with much expertise on this Committee and to have had a number of successes in preventing inappropriate development in our City, from safeguarding our greenbelt, preventing the loss of yet more family homes to stopping a developer in his tracks to ensure that a much-valued dentistry service on North Road was saved for our residents, never doubt the extraordinary impact and work of this Committee on your behalf.

Of course, these successes in planning have come in no small part thanks to the adoption of our Neighbourhood Plan. This again was a huge undertaking led by members of the Neighbourhood Plan Group – volunteers who gave hundreds of hours of their time to ensure that the future of development in our parish is decided by our community.

Outside of the day-to-day planning and licensing applications we have dealt with over the last year, I particularly welcome the recent renewal of the Regulation 7 Direction for the Durham City Conservation Area, which continues the important ban on the display of To Let boards. This renewal is a significant victory for all who care about preserving the unique character of our historic city, and the Parish Council has played a key role in securing it. In producing such a strong evidence base for its renewal, we have helped protect the visual amenity of the Conservation Area, and this forms part of our broader commitment to championing and safeguarding the heritage and environment that make Durham so special.

Finance Committee

A good Parish Council is also one which manages your money well. Whilst we have been successful in securing external grant funding to our city, over and above the management costs of the Council, the Parish Council's auditors have also commended the Parish Council for its excellent management and governance over the last financial year.

This formed part of the assessment criteria for our Quality Award and I am thrilled that this was highlighted as one of our Council's key successes.

At the same time, I am pleased that we also commit to providing financial grant support to many local community and voluntary organisations across our parish – from those which provide a hub for parts of our community to those organisations which work with and on behalf of supporting those who are most vulnerable – I

am delighted that we have been able to support their work whilst also delivering on our priorities.

Conclusion

The list of work the Parish Council carries out on behalf of our residents is truly endless. While challenges arise daily in our community—as they do in any city—I believe we have come together as a parish to meet those challenges with determination, collaboration, and care. I'm incredibly proud that, since its formation, the Parish Council has proven itself to be an organisation that truly punches above its weight—consistently working hard to represent and improve the lives of those who live, work, and study here.

I'd like to end by thanking everyone who has supported and contributed to the life of our City over the past year. And above all, my sincere thanks go to my fellow Parish Councillors for their tireless voluntary service, and to our Clerk for his dedication, professionalism, and all the work he does to keep the Council running smoothly.