



EARLS COLNE PARISH - Annual Meeting of the Electors

Held at

Village Hall, York Road, Earls Colne, CO6 2RN

At 7.00 pm on Tuesday 26th May 2026

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Ian Sparks (Chairman of the Parish Council), Clerk, Assistant Clerk, Braintree District Councillor Gabrielle Spray, 35 members of the public

Apologies: Essex County Councillor Isi Rocha, Braintree District Councillor George Courtauld

➤ Welcome from the Chairman of the Parish Council

Councillor Ian Sparks welcomed all to the meeting.

➤ To approve the minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on 29th May 2025

The minutes from the Annual Parish Meeting held on 29th May 2025 were agreed and signed as a correct record.

➤ Guest Talk: Earls Colne Heritage Museum – Mary Gee’s Story

Gordon Brown from the Earls Colne Heritage Museum gave an informative talk on the story of Mary Gee.

➤ To hear updates from our local Community Groups

Updates were received from the Heritage Museum, Twinning Association, Recreation Club, Millennium Green Trust, Allotment Association and Brick Meadows. Further organisations will be invited to speak at the May 2027 meeting.

➤ Meet your new Essex County Councillor, Isi Rocha

Councillor Rocha was unable to attend but sent the following message, read by the Clerk:

“Good evening everyone, I’m so sorry I can’t be with you in person tonight. I’m needed at County Hall this evening and I can’t be in two places at once unfortunately.

I really enjoyed popping in earlier this month to meet the team, and I want you to know that Earls Colne is firmly on my radar. I spent a lot of time here during the campaign, knocking on doors and talking to residents, and I genuinely loved every minute of it.

As you’re aware, I’m already actively pursuing the enforcement matter at Lowefields with Braintree District Council and several items (including Highways). I want you to know that I’m here with Earls Colne Parish Council and if we push together we’ll get far more done for residents than any of us can alone.

I’d love to arrange a walkabout soon with the parish council as there is definitely no substitute for seeing things on the ground.

Looking forward to seeing you all in person very soon.”

➤ **To receive a report from Braintree District Councillors**

Councillor Gabrielle Spray presented a report. Councillor George Courtauld submitted a written report.

➤ **To receive reports from the Parish Council**

The Chairman introduced the staff and councillors present. The following reports were presented: Chairman, Village Hall, Health and Safety, Highways/Police/War Memorial and Finance. Please see appendices for all written reports.

➤ **Introducing The Mary Gee Green. Share your thoughts and feedback on the future of the Parish Council’s newest open space**

Thoughts were shared on the future of the Parish Council’s newest open space. Thanks were given to those who had emailed in advance.

➤ **Open forum with Q&A from the electors**

No further questions were asked in the open forum.

Meeting closed at 9.45pm

Appendices: Reports

REPORT FOR PARISH COUNCIL ANNUAL MEETING – 2025/2026

I am pleased to provide this report giving an overview of the District Council's work, and my activities, over the last Council year.

The focus for the year has been very much on continuing to support our residents through challenging times with the cost-of-living still a major issue for many people. The food banks throughout the District continue to see a great demand for their services; the Council's Cost of Living Fund has supported people who are struggling with day-to-day living. Unfortunately, it is not anticipated that this situation will change for the better over the coming months; many residents live in the more rural parts of the District and rely on oil for heating and hot water so the war in the Middle East, and subsequent rise in fuel prices, is having a particularly severe impact on some family finances.

With this in mind, a decision to freeze Braintree Council's share of the Council Tax for 2026/27 was approved in February. The Council hopes this will provide some help to residents; there will be no cuts to frontline services.

In response to government requirements, and following a lengthy consultation period, changes to the Waste Collection Service were agreed. The kerbside collections of recyclable materials will begin in June with the new bins (or boxes) already being delivered to properties throughout the District. The aim is to increase the amount of waste we recycle and drastically reduce the amount sent to landfill. A survey conducted by the Operations team found that, currently, 30% of the contents of the grey bins is food waste that should be going into the food waste caddies!!

Additional information:

- A letter is being sent to all residents in May detailing clear dates of first collections and what goes in which bin. It will include a calendar of collection dates to May 2027
- Food cans/food trays/drink cartons/yoghurt pots etc need to be fairly clean but don't have to be squeaky clean before going into the bin

The team appreciate residents may have clear sacks left over but the items in the recycling bin must go in loose i.e. not inside a clear sack and then placed in the bin

- Residents are able to arrange a special collection for disposable nappies and hygiene products. These will go in grey sacks which will not be see-through and will be discreet i.e. no labels on the sacks. They will be collected at 2-weekly intervals and ideally should be left by the side of the grey bin but can be put inside the bin if there's room
- Shredded paper, which has previously not been able to be recycled as it was a problem for the recycling plant machinery, can now be recycled and goes in the red paper/card bin
- Bulky -Waste Collections Change: instead of a single charge for up to 6 items, there is now a separate charge per item making it more reasonable if you want to dispose of just one item. In addition to booking a collection by phone, an online booking system has been introduced. It is easy to use and details are available on the BDC website

In my role as Cabinet Member for Planning and as Chair of the Local Plan sub Committee I had an extremely busy year. The District's Local Plan is required to be reviewed and updated every five years and as ours was adopted in 2021 that review is underway. Following a call-for-sites exercise, over 300 sites were submitted and those most suitable for development came to the Committee for consideration over a series of meetings running from April – September 2025. Four Strategic Sites – those proposing over 500 homes - were allocated into the draft Plan: Land NE/SE Halstead, Kings Dene Kelvedon, East of Braintree and Land North of the A12 Hatfield Peverel. A number of smaller sites spread across the District were

allocated. In total, the Council needs to find 1,264 new homes per year until 2041, an increase from the previous target of 716 p.a. All comments submitted via the Regulation 18 public consultation will be considered and amendments may be made to the draft Plan. There is another public consultation, scheduled for late summer/early Autumn this year, before the final version is submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for Examination in 2027. The District needs to have a Local Plan found sound and in place to comply with government planning rules and, most importantly, to protect the District from unwanted, speculative developments. Detailed work on the infrastructure needed for the large sites, including improvements to roads, is underway and will continue for several months. Nothing is yet decided, no final decisions made and there is much work still to be done by BDC planning officers and the Councillors on the Local Plan sub Committee.

I am delighted that both Councillor Courtauld and I managed to distribute our Councillor Grant funds around all four villages in our Ward. We supported some excellent projects. The good news is that the Councillor Grant Scheme will continue for 2026/27 and has been increased to £1500.00 per Councillor for this year. Get your bids in!

Finally, I would like to thank the Parish Councillors and the Clerk for the sterling work they have undertaken over the year. The amount of time they spend on village matters is hugely appreciated.

With best wishes

Gabrielle Spray
Cllr Gabrielle Spray
The Colnes Ward

Annual Report 2025/26

Braintree District Councillor George Courtauld

General:

I am very lucky to share the representation of the four parishes in the Colnes Ward with Councillor Gabrielle Spray and I continue to find a reason to thank her almost every week for her wisdom, experience and advice.

As ever she has submitted her own annual report concentrating on planning issues and the Local Plan, (her particular area of expertise as Cabinet Member for Planning and Chair of the Local Plan Sub-Committee,) the new Waste Collection System, and the Council's initiatives to mitigate the cost of living crisis.

The Council has also been preoccupied this year with the impending Local Government Reorganisation, which will see the roles of County and District Councillors combined in a new Unitary Council. The District Council will cease to exist in May 2028. Despite this, and significant financial pressures, the officers and members of Braintree District Council have maintained the standard and scope of our exemplary services this year, and will continue to do so next year with no rise in their share of the 2026/27 Council Tax, and a balanced budget. This is a significant achievement.

My Role:

In my capacity as Chairman of the BDC Corporate Policy Development Committee I have attracted a significant number of questions about the Local Government Reorganisation, its timing, cost, value and democratic legitimacy. The answers to many of these questions are only becoming apparent now.

I am also Chairman of the Airfield Liaison Committee, and received fewer complainants last year about noise levels than in any year since I took over the role in 2019. Perhaps aircraft are getting quieter.

I have particularly enjoyed my trusteeship of the Earls Colne and Halstead Educational Charity, which gives out around £40,000 worth of grants annually to local students.

Being a trustee of other local trusts involved in housing, farming, hospitality and the church has undoubtedly helped me understand some of the challenges many are currently facing, and try to help.

Our Ward:

I attend all Parish Council Meetings if I am at home unless there is an unavoidable clash and take full advantage of my BDC community grant and other grants.

I am proud to have been able to help several local businesses, institutions and individuals access BDC resources in the last 12 months, or point them to help elsewhere.

I am very grateful for the diligence, commitment and support of so many of my fellow County, District and Parish councillors, and the expertise of the officers at Causeway House and the parish clerks.

ECPC Village Hall Group Annual Report 2026

Exterior Decorations and Repairs

The current Council inherited an in-progress scheme of exterior renovations. Supporting documentation was sparse so administration of progress was difficult. We and the contractor had different expectations but we have now reached an agreement with them over a small amount of work left outstanding and a final settlement. Some grant income remains outstanding.

Interior Decorations

Generally, over the years, the decoration of the Halls has taken a back seat to other expenses. The team feel that now is the time to make a start on sprucing the place up. We have some quotations from professional painters and the full Council have approved a start in some areas. We plan to work through all areas as finances permit.

Hall Condition Report

The group recognised that the Hall has many maintenance and care issues so has compiled a Condition Report/Action List. As we make progress with some of the issues we update the report and republish it as an agenda support document ahead of each Parish Meeting.

Often, it will provide information in support of proposed actions. New things that need attention, current agenda items and further news are all highlighted in red. It makes interesting reading, especially if the estimated costs of the works are considered.

Heating System

Problems with the heating system have now largely been resolved and the system will be flushed and inhibited in the summer.

Bar

A back bar bottle cooler and a donated fridge freezer have been installed, the glass washer works as intended and we have a fairly adequate supply of glasses. We hope that having a workable bar will add value and encourage more hirers.

Aims

As finance permit, we plan to work through all the tasks and make the halls more attractive and welcoming to potential hirers. The place is old and expensive to maintain but we hope that our plans will improve our hall hire income.

Annual Meeting Report regarding Highways and Police

Police

Essex Police are going through a rescheduling project at the moment. This mainly entails looking at how they place their Police staff all over Essex. At this present time, I am unable to confirm or deny if any rumours that rural villages will be better served, but I await the outcome. There are two main concerns for Parishioners in the area, being speeding vehicles and certain anti-social behaviour.

Speeding vehicles will never be stopped due to drivers not caring, being reckless or just not concentrating. Obviously, trying to get these thoughts out of their minds has a very low chance at present. So, the only alternative is speed detection. Three ways are available: purchase a mobile speed detection unit (this is an ongoing project), start up a Speed Watch Group of volunteers (another ongoing project) or ensure the Police are aware of the problems and have them visit the areas of concern and utilise their Speed Detection units. I have a good relationship with our local Neighbourhood Police Officer, and we have already carried out two speed checks this year and others are in the pipeline.

Anti-social behaviour in the Parish is not at a great height, but, there is a problem at the Car Park toilets with a group of teenagers who feel that to go in there and smoke their funny stuff, cause damage to the fittings and other items is fine and ok. Our first port of call was to close the toilets either completely for repair or cut down the availability of the toilets which did cause some hardship to residents and visitors. After discussions and meetings, we now have Essex Police and Braintree District Council Street Protection Unit making unannounced visits in an effort to either catch these miscreants or at least warn them off. The Council has a project where we are investigating the use of cameras at the car park to oversee the security of the toilets and any vehicles present.

Both items are always under scrutiny to see if any more can be done to stop the problems.

Highways

2026 so far has been a bundle of joy for all of us whether we use the roads to drive, cycle or be carried on due to the massive works which have been carried out in the Parish. There were obvious problems causing mayhem, some of which could not be avoided and some which encourages by road users on the back lanes or deliberately avoiding not to use the correct diversion, even though it was a long winding route. Now it's all over, we hope, we can get down to the business of getting ECC Highways to start filling in the potholes. This is a mammoth task for them and without Government giving enough money to Councils to tackle the problem effectively, it will continue for some years. The ideal solution, which is very costly, would be to resurface the main roads to eliminate the problem for some years, but that is pie in the sky!! Highway defects need to be sent to the Parish Council so we can collate them and then cajole ECC to sort out. Not letting anybody know means that they will not be repaired or just get worse.

This is your environment and the Council needs your input to try and get things sorted.

Ian Sparks Parish Councillor

Earls Colne Parish Council

Financial Year Report 2025/26

The 2025/26 financial year has been one of significant transition, recovery and improvement for Earls Colne Parish Council. During the year, the Council continued to deliver essential local services and community facilities whilst also addressing a number of governance and financial management challenges inherited from previous arrangements.

I was appointed as Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) in late July 2025 at the request of the Braintree District Council Monitoring Officer, with the specific task of supporting the newly formed Council and helping to stabilise governance, administration and financial processes. The role was initially offered on a six-month basis; however, following the progress achieved in stabilising governance and financial management arrangements, the Council subsequently extended the position with additional hours on a permanent contract. At the point of my appointment, it was already known that the Council would not meet the deadline for submission of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) to the external auditor, as the deadline had passed prior to my commencement.

A significant amount of work was therefore required throughout the year to address issues identified within the Internal Audit Report and to strengthen financial controls, governance procedures and operational administration. This included resolving historic issues relating to banking access, financial oversight and compliance with the Council's Financial Regulations.

One of the key financial improvements implemented during the year was the transition of the Council's banking arrangements from the Co-operative Bank to Unity Trust Bank. This change was made to ensure the Council's banking arrangements fully support the dual authorisation requirements contained within the Council's Financial Regulations, thereby strengthening financial security and governance.

Financially, the Council remained in a stable position during the year. Total receipts for the year amounted to £309,429.75, with the largest source of income continuing to be the annual precept. Additional funding was received through grants, Section 106 contributions and capital funding linked to community infrastructure and improvement projects.

Total payments during the year amounted to £291,443.78. The Council's expenditure reflected a continued investment in community assets and services, including playground improvements, village hall refurbishment and maintenance, staffing costs, public amenities and health and safety. The Council also continued to support local initiatives and maintain essential operational services across the parish.

The Council closed the financial year with bank balances totalling £146,113.91 and cash in hand of £9.19, providing a sound financial position moving into the 2026/27 financial year.

Whilst much progress has been made over the course of the year, there remains ongoing work to continue strengthening governance, financial reporting and operational resilience. However, the Council is now in a significantly improved position compared with the situation inherited during summer 2025, with stronger financial controls, improved oversight and clearer governance arrangements in place.

The 2025/26 year has therefore been one focused not only on maintaining services for residents, but also on rebuilding effective governance and financial management foundations for the future.