

## The Normandy Action Group (NAG) Annual General Meeting 31 October 2023 Chair's Report

### Governance and Finance

1. At the 2022 AGM the following were re-elected as Steering Committee members: Dina Ahmed, Martin Sweeting, Mike Aaronson (Chair), Mike Dean, Nick Norton, and Paul Hart (Treasurer). A new Steering Committee will be elected at this meeting.
2. A year ago we resolved to seek grant funding to allow us to continue to provide an information service to local residents by means of our website and regular emailed newsletters. We were grateful to Councillors Bob Hutton and Keith Witham for their encouragement to apply to Normandy Parish Council and Surrey County Council respectively, and we are pleased to say that we received a grant of £100 from each of these bodies. The Treasurer will report at the AGM on how much headroom this gives us, and at what stage we will need to revisit our future funding model.

### External Context

3. The national debate about housebuilding continues, with a trend in both major political parties towards a more centralised approach. Although, under pressure from 'Blue Wall' MPs, the Conservative government has made local housing targets advisory rather than mandatory, it has also passed an amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB) that will give the Secretary of State power to [override](#) local development plans. At the same time, the Labour Party has said it will ["bulldoze"](#) local opposition if it stands in the way of meeting national housing targets.
4. Sadly, neither Party has much to say on the chronic under-resourcing of Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) that leads to delays in processing applications and makes enforcing existing regulations almost impossible. During the course of the year, along with many other LPAs, Guildford Borough Council (GBC) has fallen further behind in meeting its targets. Many applications from 2021 have yet to be decided, including in Normandy, and in a couple of cases applicants have either appealed directly to the Planning Inspector on grounds of 'non-determination' (unsuccessfully) or have simply gone ahead and carried out unauthorised development of the site (see para 14, below).
5. In last year's report I mentioned a number of major reviews that would impact on Normandy. Happily, the review by Natural England of the boundaries of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) [recommended](#) that most of the existing Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV) that runs north of the Hog's Back from Tongham in the west to Guildford in the east be included in the expanded AONB (known as 'The Hog's Back extension'). This is good news for us, but there is still a long way to go before these proposals can be implemented; full details of the road ahead can be seen [here](#).
6. The deadline for Privy Council approval of the revised parliamentary constituencies following the [Boundary Commission review](#) is given as "late October 2023", but this is a formality, and at the next General Election Normandy and Pirbright will leave Woking constituency and become part of Surrey Heath. In case this should happen before our next AGM we would like to record our appreciation of the good engagement and support we have had from our current MP, Jonathan Lord; we wish him well, and look forward to continuing support from our next MP, whoever they may be!
7. The review of local authority boundaries recommended, as expected, that Normandy and Pirbright Wards be amalgamated, with two Councillors representing us at GBC. The local elections in May 2023 went ahead on this basis, with David Bilbé and Keith Witham being elected; congratulations to them both. Before the election we asked all the

candidates to give us their responses to the [manifesto](#) produced by the Guildford Residents' Association (GRA), "Calling for a Green and Distinctive Guildford"; we published their responses on our website [here](#). In the May 2023 local elections, power at GBC passed from a coalition of Liberal Democrats and Residents for Guildford Villages to the Liberal Democrats on their own.

8. An issue for GBC is planning height in Guildford; there is considerable concern from local residents and conservation groups that the proliferation of high-rise buildings will fundamentally change the character of the town. We already have the go-ahead for the [Solum development](#) at the rail station (up to 10 storeys) and the [Debenhams site redevelopment](#) (7 and 8 storeys). Just this month, the GBC Planning Committee has approved the long-contested [North Street Development](#) site (up to 11 storeys). One of the 'Asks' in the GRA [manifesto](#) referred to above was "Urgently agree limits to ensure building height, density and bulk are appropriate for setting – often 3 to 4 storeys in centre, up to 6 in a few selected places".
9. A further controversial issue is the siting of solar farms on agricultural land, especially where they are in designated areas such as AONB. The University of Surrey's plans to install a solar farm on agricultural land to the west of Blackwell Farm have not yet been considered by the GBC Planning Committee, but they have attracted a wide range of opposition, including from the Independent Chair of the Surrey Hills AONB Board, who described the plans as "[unconvincing](#)". The CPRE continues to [campaign](#) for solar panels to be sited on rooftops and in car parks, rather than on agricultural land.

#### Activities

10. Since the 2022 AGM we have circulated to our followers by email 6 'Planning Matters' newsletters and 'Planning Alerts' (previous year: 5). Thanks to heroic efforts by Nick Norton, we have migrated our follower database to the Mailchimp platform, which is more efficient and effective, providing a better experience for our audience. Our subscriber numbers have increased to 233 from 214 a year ago. All sign-ups, and the maintenance of our list, have continued to conform to the NAG Email and Data Protection Policy as required by the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA).
11. We have also written 2 articles for '[The Villager](#)' magazine, and 1 for the [St Mark's Parish Magazine](#). We continue to use our [website](#) as a means of keeping our followers informed of local, regional, and national planning matters, and we are proud of it as a well-used resource. The 7 substantive articles on the website that we have published since the last AGM have attracted on average 619 'hits'; this is in addition to the 11 posts on individual planning applications, which have received an average of 69 'hits' each.
12. In our newsletters we have attempted to highlight the most significant local planning applications and the wider policy issues they raise. We always encourage people to visit the website of Normandy Parish Council and in particular its [Planning Committee](#), which considers all applications in Normandy. Over the last year we have been 'nagging' GBC to re-introduce the system whereby local residents can receive automatic notification of selected planning applications; because of IT systems integration (or rather the lack of it) when Guildford joined Waverley, this was out of action for the best part of a year, but we are glad to report that it is now up and running again. On our website we have [a guide](#) showing how to set this system up; it is not complicated.

## Impact

13. We have supported the residents of Flexford and Wanborough in their [opposition](#) to a proposed 74 mobile home development at Homestead Farm on West Flexford Lane. An online [petition](#) organised by them has attracted more than 2000 signatures. The campaign has led to good engagement with GBC, in whose court the ball now rests. We have also remained in close touch with Wanborough residents and Wanborough Parish Council over the continuing scandal of unauthorised development in Wanborough Fields; progress here is excruciatingly slow, and the site remains an eyesore.
14. More recently we have seen unauthorised development to the south of the A323 between Wyke and Ash, with large scale tree and ground clearance, laying of hard core, and installation of a large caravan with a second one probably imminent. This was the subject of planning application [21/P/02167](#), which like so many others is still outstanding. The applicant has decided to act without authorisation, and it seems that the only way GBC can respond is belatedly to rule on the planning application; if it is refused then the applicant may appeal, and if that is refused then enforcement action can begin. As we know from Wanborough Fields this is a lengthy and frustrating process.
15. When we became aware of this situation we wrote to the Lead Councillor for Planning at GBC, Councillor George Potter. We received a detailed and refreshingly frank reply, which only served to emphasise that the LPA has very limited powers in such situations, and that they suffer from a severe shortage of the resources needed to take effective action. We will report on this in greater detail at the AGM.

## Wider Engagement

16. In addition to the engagement with GBC reported above, we have continued to attend meetings of the GRA when they occur. These are always informative, and help to establish solidarity among residents' groups from across the Borough. Membership at £15 per year is extremely good value. We also attend useful online briefing sessions hosted by the now well-established [Community Planning Alliance](#) (CPA). Their [Manifesto 2023/24](#) asks for a planning system that:
  - Gives communities power to influence;
  - Better protects green spaces, blue spaces, and wildlife;
  - Puts the right developments in the right places.

## Looking Ahead

17. The coming year may (or may not) see a General Election and a possible change of Government. Regardless of who wins, the twin challenges of building more homes while safeguarding the environment, in the context of sluggish economic growth and an increasingly polarised national political debate, will prove daunting. Citizens who care about both the countryside and the sustainable development of affordable housing must make their voices heard. We will continue to try to facilitate that as best we can.

## Acknowledgements

18. I thank my fellow Steering Committee members for their support during the year, and also those of our followers who take the trouble to engage in the public consultation on planning proposals. It can feel like hard work at times, but it is necessary if we are to preserve the local environment that means so much to us.

Mike Aaronson  
26 October 2023