

Normandy Action Group (NAG) Annual General Meeting
31 October 2023 at 2000 in Normandy Village Hall
Draft Minutes

Present: Mike Aaronson (in the Chair), Roshan Bailey, David Bilbé, Phelim Brady, Vera Bulbeck, Mike Dean, Bill Garson, Paul Hart (NAG Treasurer), Bob Hutton, Christine King, Nick Norton, George Potter, John Stiff, Martin Sweeting, Keith Witham.

Apologies: Jonathan Lord, MP.

1. Mike Aaronson, Chair of the NAG Steering Committee, opened the meeting and thanked those present for attending. He thanked Roshan Bailey, Chair of Trustees of Normandy Village Hall, for making the Hall available at no cost, and welcomed Guildford Borough Councillors David Bilbé, George Potter, and Keith Witham (also the Surrey County Councillor for Normandy), and Councillor Bob Hutton, Chair of Normandy Parish Council (NPC) Planning Committee. All those present introduced themselves to the meeting.
2. The Chair had posted the draft Minutes of the 2022 AGM on the NAG website, and said he hoped they could be taken as read; they were then approved. Under Matters Arising he reported that he had duly submitted funding applications to Normandy Parish Council and Surrey County Council, and that NAG had received a grant of £100 from each of these bodies; the Treasurer would report later in the meeting on the organisation's finances. All candidates at the local elections in May had been invited to submit their views on planning matters ahead of the elections, and their responses had been posted on the NAG website. In the light of the imminent elections he had delayed writing to the Leader of Guildford Borough Council (GBC) about the lack of resources for planning enforcement, but had instead written in September to Councillor Potter, the Chair of the GBC Planning Committee, as a result of which the latter had kindly offered to attend the AGM.
3. The Chair spoke to his Annual Report, which had been posted on the NAG website and had been flagged along with the other papers for the meeting in an email newsletter. The Report dealt with changes in the external context for planning, both nationally and locally, as well as the outcomes of boundary reviews relating to the Surrey Hills AONB, local authorities, and parliamentary constituencies. It highlighted a number of key issues facing GBC, notably relating to the height of buildings in Guildford town, and the proposed solar farm on Green Belt/proposed AONB land to the west of Guildford. It also gave an account of NAG activities during the year, and described areas where some impact had been achieved. Finally, it described NAG's links with other bodies with shared interests, notably the Guildford Residents Association (GRA), and the Community Planning Alliance (CPA). **Action: Chair to write to Bob Hutton about possible Normandy Parish Council membership of the GRA.**
4. Discussion centred on the threat to wildlife from development in rural areas, the potential value of neighbourhood plans, and the seeming ineffectiveness of planning enforcement in Guildford Borough. The Chair invited Councillor Potter to brief the meeting on the latter point, about which they had had extensive correspondence.

5. Councillor Potter expressed his sympathy with the frustration felt by local residents in the face of the apparent impunity with which individuals could act in defiance of planning regulations. He explained the limitations of the planning system. Apart from chronic under-resourcing of the planning function, which had been going on for years, the national planning system itself did not make life easy for enforcement officers, who did a good job in extremely difficult circumstances. First, planning breaches were civil, not criminal, matters. This meant that any legal action taken by local planning authorities (LPAs) such as GBC had to be taken through the civil courts, where there were large backlogs, lengthy delays for hearing dates, and numerous potential stages of appeal. Additionally, LPAs were given very limited direct enforcement powers, obliging them to seek court orders for most meaningful responses to a planning breach.
6. Furthermore, legislation required planning authorities to offer an individual an initial opportunity to regularise any planning breach through seeking planning permission. This applied regardless of whether there was any realistic prospect of such permission's being obtained. This was precisely the situation regarding the 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 had been the subject of planning application [21/P/02167](#), which like so many others was still outstanding. The applicant had decided to act without authorisation, and the only way GBC could respond was belatedly to rule on the planning application; if it was refused then the applicant could appeal, and only if that was refused could enforcement action begin. Councillor Potter said he had been told by officials that a decision on the application would be forthcoming by the end of the year.
7. Comparisons were drawn between this site and the long-running saga of unauthorised development at Wanborough Fields. Councillor Potter said he understood there to be 11 open enforcement cases there, going as far back as 2018, with at least one new one every year. One of these was nearing the point where prosecution would take place through the courts, and although this indicated how slow the process was, it also demonstrated that enforcement officers did not give up; justice was slow, but eventually it was done. In response to a question, Councillor Potter confirmed that there was no requirement to carry out a value for money assessment before decisions to prosecute were taken, even though this was inevitably an expensive process.
8. The Chair thanked Councillor Potter for his frankness and for taking the trouble to attend the meeting - by bus, a long way from home, and on a wet night! He suggested that a greater emphasis on communication with the public by GBC would go a long way to correct any impression that its officials were not doing all they could- as the Councillor had demonstrated in his account. For example, there had previously been good communication from GBC with local residents about Wanborough Fields, but this had fallen away. Councillor Potter undertook to take this thought back to officials.
9. The Treasurer presented his report. The key point was that, assuming similar activities in 2024 as in 2023, NAG was fully funded through to the end of 2024. As at 1 November 2022 the balance of funds stood at £95.22. Income in the year was £200 (the two grants of £100 each from NPC and SCC), and expenditure £118.66 (£15 GRC subscription and £103.66 website domain and hosting costs); the balance at 1 Nov 2023 therefore stood

at £176.56. On this basis NAG would be able to pay for all expected liabilities as they fell due in 2024 from existing funds. However the website hosting fee, due in July 2025, would only be partly covered by forecast available funds; NAG could therefore continue to provide information to members and community without subscription through 2024, but a further discussion would be needed before the 2024 AGM as to whether we wished to apply for further grants or find some other way of funding our activities.

10. In discussion, confidence was expressed by Councillor Bilbé and others that, should it be necessary, the local community would put their hands in their pockets to support the work of NAG as they had done in the past. But, as per the discussion at the previous year's AGM, it was felt that it was better to reserve this for when a major fundraising effort was required to address a specific issue. Councillors Hutton and Witham confirmed that there would be no barrier to submitting further applications for grant funding in future years. **Action: NAG Steering Group to bring recommendations to the 2024 AGM.**
11. The discussion moved to a more general consideration of local planning matters, and in particular how members of the public could stay abreast of planning applications in their area and on which they might wish to comment. The Chair pointed out that a guide to the process for receiving automatic notifications was available on the NAG website; the system had been broken for much of the previous year but was now working again.
12. Councillor Hutton spoke about the work of the NPC Planning Committee and expressed gratitude to NAG for their indirect support by virtue of their newsletters and website articles. Many of the applications that came to the attention of the Committee were about pushing the limits of the Green Belt, and taking advantage of the fact that the settlements of Normandy, Flexford, and Walden Cottages were since the adoption of the Local Plan now 'inset' from the Green Belt rather than 'washed over' by it as in the past.
13. Nick Norton gave a helicopter view of some of the other issues affecting the future operation of the planning system in England. In particular, changes to the system had now been incorporated into the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, and a further round of consultation was underway on the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Some of the changes already enacted could have positive consequences, e.g. the move to make the Standard Model of Housing Need assessment advisory rather than mandatory, but the Government had yet to respond to the results of the public consultation about this, and things might equally move in the opposite direction. In this context, Councillor Potter pointed out that the 5-year review of the Guildford Local Plan was due in April 2024; the rules in place at that time could make a big difference to Guildford Borough.
14. Under Any Other Business Roshan Bailey drew the meeting's attention to her attempts to have recognised as a Public Right of way a path used by walkers and horse riders alike that crossed part of the area proposed as a solar farm to the west of Guildford (see above). She was encouraged to make sure the details of this were available before the GBC Planning Committee considered the application, which was believed to be imminent. Councillor Witham, as a Surrey County Councillor, said he was glad to report that there had been positive discussions between the management of the waste processing site at Chapel Farm and local residents about noise pollution issues. Martin Sweeting raised the issue of possible weight restrictions for lorries using Glaziers Lane,

to which, sadly, there did not seem to be any easy answers.

15. All members of the existing Steering Group had indicated their willingness to stand again. The meeting unanimously re-elected Mike Aaronson (Chair), Paul Hart (Treasurer), Dina Ahmed, Mike Dean, Nick Norton, and Martin Sweeting, to serve for a further year on the Group. Paul Hart proposed a vote of thanks to the Chair for his hard work during the year in keeping NAG pointing in the right direction and making sure local residents were informed about relevant planning matters.
16. The meeting closed at 2150.

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