

The Normandy Action Group (NAG) Annual General Meeting 1 November 2022 Chair's Report

Governance

1. At the 2021 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.

External Context

2. The year has been notable more for debates at national level about the failure to build a sufficient number of houses and claims that changes are needed to 'the planning system' to deliver this, rather than for any dramatic events at local level. The major concern locally is the capacity and performance of the Planning Department at Guildford Borough Council (GBC). This is seen in the length of time being taken to approve applications ([only 26%](#) decided within official deadlines), but also in the ability of Planning Enforcement to keep up with the many breaches of the regulations that we see in our area, most visibly but by no means exclusively at Wanborough Fields. This is a political issue that can only be resolved by Councillors.
3. At the national level it remains to be seen what approach the new Government of Rishi Sunak will take to increasing the number of new homes built. Its two predecessors were unable to square the circle of not wanting to alienate 'blue wall' supporters in the south of England while, at the same time wanting to make it easier for developers to escape what they saw as burdensome restrictions inherent in 'the system'. It remains a moot point whether 'the market' really can deliver sufficient numbers of truly affordable homes, and whether it is really the fault of the planning system as such that so few are built. Charities such as the CPRE and Shelter, for example, certainly take [a different view](#). Meanwhile the proposals announced by the short-lived Truss government to ease environmental protections unleashed an unprecedented storm of protest from across a very wide range of wildlife and conservation charities; see for example this [press release](#) from the RSPB.
4. Three public consultations that will have an impact on Normandy have been taking place. The first is a [review](#) by Natural England of the boundaries of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This has now concluded, but as we [reported](#) on our website, recommendations are not expected before mid-2023. The second and third concerned reviews of local authority and parliamentary constituency boundaries. The report by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, which has [recommended](#) that Normandy Ward of GBC be amalgamated with Pirbright (although each would retain a separate Parish Council), has been laid before Parliament and we assume that the elections to GBC in 2023 will be for a two-Councillor constituency. The proposals for revised parliamentary constituencies will be [announced](#) on 8 November; we wait with interest to know whether the original suggestion that Normandy would leave Woking constituency for Surrey Heath will be maintained or revised.
5. A year ago we reported on a new network of grassroots organisations, the Community Planning Alliance (CPA), formed to lobby for improvements to the planning system (more local ownership, better environmental protection, and the right housing in the right place). NAG has been involved and has attended some of their online meetings. The CPA now has its own [website](#), which contains much useful information. One area of particular relevance to local residents is the potential tension between renewable energy and food security, given the University of Surrey's plans to install a solar farm on agricultural land on which we reported in our most recent newsletter (#4 of 2022, 9 August). NAG has not

yet taken a position on this; we await a formal planning application and will aim to keep our followers informed of the issues.

Activities

6. Since the 2021 AGM we have circulated to our followers by email 5 'Planning Matters' newsletters (previous year: 7). We have also written 4 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 valuable resource on planning matters. The last 21 articles on the website, going back to November 2021, have received an average of 355 'hits' each. The average figure for the 6 months to November 2021 was 448, and it is noticeable that the number of 'hits' has fallen away in the last three months of this year, possibly because we have not issued a newsletter since August.
7. During the year the net number of people subscribed to our mailing list (accounting for some who have left the village) rose from 211 to 214. (To put this in context, the number of subscribers to Nextdoor has risen in the year from 1049 to 1162, covering 53% of all households in Normandy.) All sign-ups, and the maintenance of our list, have conformed 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).

Impact

8. As in recent years, much of our activity this year has been to keep our followers abreast of the sustained attacks on the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV) at Wanborough Fields. The eyesore in the lower AGLV field, to the right where Westwood Lane turns east, has been of particular concern, and we have been actively supporting our friends in Wanborough to secure the engagement of Planning Enforcement. It is worth noting that despite this and other anxieties that until recently the only applications that have been successful have been for water taps, with polytunnels, storage barns, burial grounds, and suchlike all refused. (There is currently considerable concern about the approval of a barbed wire fence around one of the plots in the AGLV, which seems to go against the Article 4 Direction; we and others are pursuing this with the Planning Department.) A current application for an electricity power supply in one of the plots the upper AGLV field, adjacent to Westwood Lane, was turned down by GBC but has gone to appeal; this could set an important precedent. And decisions on planning applications are one thing; effective enforcement is another.
9. Furthermore, it is not just in Wanborough Fields where enforcement issues are evident. Local residents have raised concerns regarding developments at, for example: Anchor Copse, on the Guildford Road; Chapel Farm at Willey Green; Cobbett's Hill Road; and the wood behind Wyke School. Enforcement Officers are always helpful, but they have a near-impossible workload – which is why public engagement and support is so important if respect for the planning system is to be preserved.
10. Regarding planning applications in Normandy, we contributed a [short guide](#) to the planning system for the St Mark's magazine and have reproduced it on our website. This complements the [simple guide](#) on our website about how to receive notifications of planning applications. In our newsletters we comment on individual applications only where they raise wider policy issues, for example where we see a danger of gradual encroachment on the Green Belt. While some householder developments generate strong feelings among neighbours, we feel it is not NAG's place to take a position on this, and encourage people to contact the democratically-elected Parish Council if they wish to make representations.

Wider Engagement

11. We have continued to engage with residents' associations across the Borough of Guildford through our membership of the Guildford Residents' Associations ([GRA](#)), to whom we pay a modest annual subscription of £15. They have produced excellent analyses during the year, for example concerning building heights in Guildford including, but not restricted to, the now resubmitted application for the Debenhams redevelopment ([21/P/02232](#)), and GBC's draft Development Management Policies. We also monitor issues where the lead authority is not GBC but Surrey County Council (SCC); for example, waste management facilities in Normandy.

Looking Ahead

12. There are a number of previously approved developments in Normandy for which building has yet to start. The Elms Centre, for example, ([19/P/00023](#)) would bring 28 new dwellings. Another ([20/P/01148](#)) is for 16 new 'affordable' houses in Beech Lane. Anxieties remain about the effect of these and other developments without compensating improvements in infrastructure. The large-scale development currently taking place in Ash is already creating extra pressure on our road network.
13. Decisions are still awaited on a number of individual applications for development in the Green Belt in Normandy and Wanborough that NAG considers to be inappropriate, for example: on land at the rear of 75 Glaziers Lane ([21/P/01730](#)); on land to the west of North Wyke Farm ([21/P/02167](#)); on land to the east of Glaziers Lane ([22/P/01207](#)). Others have been refused during the year, for example: land at 'Greengage Farm, West Flexford Lane ([21/P/00914](#)); land to the west of North Wyke Farm ([21/P/01481](#)).
14. Objections by local residents do have an impact, and can make the difference between applications being considered by the GBC [Planning Committee](#) or being signed off by planning officers under delegated authority. A minimum of 10 objections is required for a 'householder' application to go to the Committee; 20 for 'minor' or 'major' applications (we have urged GBC to provide greater clarity on their website about the definition of these categories).

Acknowledgements

15. I should like to record my thanks to my fellow Steering Committee members for their support during the year, and also to 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.
16. Finally, although for the last few years NAG has managed to operate without calling for subscriptions from our followers, our cash reserve to pay for essential costs (website, email, GRA subscription) will be exhausted during the coming year. This issue is considered in the Treasurer's Report, and will be discussed at the AGM. It is to be hoped that local residents will see the value in keeping NAG afloat, and will be prepared to offer a modest financial contribution to make this possible.

Mike Aaronson

1 November 2022

(revised 3 Nov 22 to reflect better the latest developments at Wanborough Fields)