

The Normandy Action Group (NAG) Annual General Meeting 29 October 2024 Chair's Report

Governance and Finance

1. At the 2023 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). Les Asher was co-opted as an additional member during the year. A new Steering Committee will be elected at this meeting.
2. At the AGM in 2022 we resolved to seek grant funding to allow us to continue to provide a free information service to local residents by means of our website and regular emailed newsletters. Councillors Bob Hutton and Keith Witham encouraged us to apply to Normandy Parish Council and Surrey County Council respectively, and we received a grant of £100 from each of these bodies. The Treasurer will report at the AGM that these funds will expire during the coming year; we will therefore need to decide whether to submit further applications or to find an alternative funding model.

External Context

3. The national debate about housebuilding has acquired even greater prominence with the election of a Labour Government. The latter has announced its intention to 'simplify the planning system', and has conducted a [public consultation](#) on its [proposed reforms](#) to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). These include a new, mandatory, way of setting local housing targets; in the case of the Guildford Borough Council (GBC) area this entails an increase from the current target of 562 to a new one of 1102, a very demanding increase for a Borough with 85% of its area in the Green Belt. GBC has [challenged](#) its new allocation; it remains to be seen whether this will have any effect.
4. Further bits of the Government's jigsaw will become visible in the Budget, due the day after this AGM, and the promised Planning and Infrastructure Bill, expected sometime in 2025, that was announced in the [King's Speech](#). The Government has made some positive noises about the need to reinforce the planning capacity and capability of Local Planning Authorities (LPAs), such as GBC, but the other signals coming out from the Treasury about cuts to Departmental budgets make it unclear where the money for that could come from. I shall be delighted if my pessimism proves unfounded!
5. The review by Natural England of the boundaries of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) continues to rumble along. Although it has [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, a [further step](#) has been introduced to allow for consultation on a proposed additional extension in Hampshire; it is anyone's guess how quickly the process will be concluded; let's hope it will be some time in 2025. Unfortunately this will be too late to influence GBC's decision about the University of Surrey's plans to install a solar farm on potential AONB land to the west of Blackwell Farm, which after a long delay goes before the GBC Planning Committee on 6 November; Officers have [recommended](#) approval.
6. At the General Election in July Normandy and Pirbright duly left Woking constituency and became part of Surrey Heath. We therefore have a new MP, Liberal Democrat Alasdair Pinkerton, who we are glad to say has joined the NAG mailing list! We therefore have two Conservative Borough Councillors (one of whom is also a County Councillor) representing us on a Borough Council controlled by the Liberal Democrats, with a Conservative County Council, a Liberal Democrat MP, all under a Labour Government. Almost (but not quite) a full house...

Activities

7. Since the 2023 AGM we have circulated to our followers by email 7 'Planning Matters' newsletters and 'Planning Alerts' (previous year: 6). Our subscriber numbers on the Mailchimp platform have increased to 250 from 233 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).
8. We have also written 2 articles for '[The Villager](#)' magazine and we continue to use our [website](#) as a means of keeping our followers informed of local, regional, and national planning matters. The 6 substantive articles that we have published on the website since the last AGM have attracted on average 1,124 'hits' each (last year 619); this is in addition to the 10 posts on individual planning applications, which have received an average of 256 'hits' (last year 69). The figure for substantive articles is boosted by a somewhat unbelievable 3541 views of our [news item](#) announcing the temporary Article 4 Direction at Bailes Lane (see below), although we were also pleased to see that our [think piece](#) on the Government's planning reforms also attracted 966 views.
9. 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. On our website we have [a guide](#) showing how to set up automatic notification from GBC of planning applications of one's own choice; it is not a complicated process.

Impact

10. Undoubtedly the main story of the year has been our successful campaign to support local residents to secure an Article 4 Direction on the fields to the west of Bailes Lane, which we were concerned might suffer the same fate as the fields at Wanborough. We started an online [Petition](#), which received 176 signatures (in the process helping GBC to see that the process for signing such a petition was needlessly complicated; they have now simplified it). We worked closely with Normandy Parish Council and local residents, and were supported by our two Borough Councillors, David Bilbé and Keith Witham. We were all delighted when in September the Article 4 was made permanent. This means that nothing can happen now on those fields without GBC's permission.
11. We have been less successful in advocating for more resources to be allocated to planning enforcement (see para 4, above). The unauthorised development to the south of the A323 between Wyke and Ash, the subject of outstanding planning application [21/P/02167](#), with large scale tree and ground clearance, laying of hard core, and installation of - now two - large caravans, continues to frustrate us and amaze everyone who sees what is happening. It would seem that, for whatever reason, GBC is either unable or unwilling to act. GBC has had some success, though, regarding enforcement action at Wanborough Fields, although the process there remains grindingly slow.

Wider Engagement

12. 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, which could be especially important in the year ahead. 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), including on the proposed reforms to the NPPF.

Looking Ahead

13. The coming year will be critical in terms of the approach the new Government takes to address the housing shortage. The mood music is not encouraging in terms of Green Belt protection. It may well be that the so-called 'strategic site' between Normandy and Flexford that was at one stage included in the Guildford Local Plan 2015-34 will come back into consideration, filling in the entire area between Glaziers and Westwood Lanes. This would have a devastating impact on wildlife, and fundamentally change the nature of our community.
14. Citizens who care about both the countryside and the sustainable development of affordable housing must make their voices heard, and help to show that these two aims do not have to be at odds with each other. NAG will continue to try to facilitate that as best we can.

Acknowledgements

15. I would like to 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
28 October 2024