



Local Government for Langton Green, Speldhurst, Ashurst and Old Groombridge

**NOTES OF THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> MAY AT 7.00PM  
IN LANGTON GREEN VILLAGE HALL**

There were 8 Councillors and 2 Clerks in attendance along with Tunbridge Wells Borough Cllr Matthew Sankey.

Apologies received from: Cllr Turner (covid related).

There were over 20 residents in attendance.

Parish Council Chair Cllr Curry opened the meeting by welcoming everyone in attendance, and introduced Councillors Dooley, Ellery, Lyle, Norton, Rowe, Scarbrough and Tarricone. He added that there were currently vacancies on the parish council and hoped that after hearing more at the evening's meeting, potential candidates would come forward with an interest in applying for the role. Any interested parties would be most welcome to have an informal chat with the Clerk to find out more.

Cllr Curry then introduced the Clerk, Mrs Katie Neve, and the Assistant Clerk, Mrs Catherine Barrett. There were 3 other members of staff working for the Parish Council: Mr Chris May, Responsible Financial Officer (RFO), Mrs Kate Harman, Assistant Clerk, and Mr Len Cooper, Groundsman. All staff worked flexibly, and on a part-time basis.

Cllr Curry then handed over to Cllr Norton to present the 2023 Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) award for outstanding contribution to the community. Cllr Norton said he was delighted to present the award to outgoing Councillor, Mrs Julia Soyke. While he felt sure everyone would know why Mrs Soyke's contributions to the parish merited this award, he wanted to highlight the following:

- Mrs Soyke's active involvement in improving quality of life in Ashurst included sitting on the board of Trustees at Ashurst Village Hall, where she had been instrumental in the building of a new hall.
- Mrs Soyke had served as a Parish Councillor for over 20 years, sitting on every committee and chairing many. During this time she had also served as Borough Councillor and Mayor.
- Mrs Soyke's approach to getting things done had always been one of common sense and minimal fuss, which deserved a massive thank you from the community.

On receiving her award Mrs Soyke thanked the parish council, saying that it had been her favourite council of all to sit on, providing great fun as well as the opportunity to make a difference. She thoroughly recommended becoming a Parish Councillor and encouraged anyone who was interested to go for it.

While on the subject of former Chairs, Cllr Curry said he also wished to thank outgoing Councillor Mr Neil Barrington-Johnson for his many contributions and wise counsel, presenting him with an Acer Tree to much applause. After thanking the Parish Council, Mr Barrington-Johnson said he would like to repeat Mrs Soyke's message about the rewarding nature of a Parish Councillor's role and encouraged people to apply.

Before moving on to the next item, Cllr Curry assured attendees that there would be an opportunity to ask questions about Langton Green Pavilion Café later in the meeting. He then handed over to Cllr Scarbrough to introduce the Guest Speaker.

Cllr Scarbrough welcomed the Rt Hon Greg Clark MP (Mr Clark) on behalf of the Parish Council and all those present, and thanked him for agreeing to attend the meeting as Guest Speaker.

Mr Clark congratulated Cllr Curry on his election as Borough Councillor for Speldhurst and Bidborough Ward. He added that he was pleased to see Borough Cllr Sankey at the meeting. It was excellent to have a businessman who had contributed so much to Tunbridge Wells life represent the business community at borough level, and to have him represent Speldhurst too.

Mr Clark said that Speldhurst Parish Council was one of the best run Parish Councils in the country, with few of the issues typically experienced among local councils. He was pleased to see that the precept had been kept low, and that the village halls, all of whom were efficiently run by separate management committees, were in good shape.

Mr Clark said that he wanted to touch on the correspondence he had received over the past year. Water was the most intense issue, and there had been a torrid run up to Christmas which saw businesses and homes without water for an extended period of time. Business people had been looking to recoup income lost during the pandemic and did not need to suffer any further.

Mr Clark was pleased that people had been in touch about this as it had enabled him to debate the matter in Parliament. Thanks to involvement from the Chief Executive of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC), households who had been affected were being compensated, and residents should get in touch if they had not yet received compensation. Resilience plans were also being drawn up to be better placed to deal with issues in the future.

The other aspect of the water issue was the regular pollution of streams in the parish by Southern water. As Chair of the Dorset Arms Angling Society – which has fishing rights on the Burrswood Estate - Mr Clark had been working to have the quality of water at Burrswood monitored. There was a joint project between the Environment Agency and the South East Rivers Trust to look into this.

Another issue was aircraft noise. Mr Clark thanked Mr David Howden, who had been an advisor to him on the subject for some time. After Mr Howden had brought the relaxation of night flight restrictions at Gatwick Airport to Mr Clark's attention, the Transport Minister had intervened, so it really was worth getting in touch if you noticed something concerning.

Gatwick Airport was also looking in to using its second runway. Although aeroplane engines were set to become quieter, residents living immediately under the flight path would not benefit from this. With double the number of flights going out this would counter the quieter engines.

Mr Clark commented that the results of the public consultation on this matter had not yet been published, but Speldhurst Parish was without doubt the worst affected parish in the borough, and the work of the Parish Council's Air Traffic Working Group was extremely important.

Another issue – which Cllr Sankey had been working hard to resolve – was buses. Firstly, there was a shortage of bus drivers. Also, some routes were subsidised by Kent County Council, while others were commercial. Finally, there had been a drop in passenger numbers since the Covid pandemic, making routes less commercially viable. The buses most affected by these factors were the school buses.

Mr Clark said he was due to have a meeting with the leader of Kent County Council to try to get ahead of the issues before pupils returned for the new school year in September. Cllr Sankey asked for it to be noted that cross-travel in Kent presented a unique challenge, because the existence of selective schools meant that more pupils were travelling across Sevenoaks, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells and surrounding areas to get to their school, rather than attending the nearest one. Mr Clark said that Government needed to accept this situation and ensure that there is a means of travel for all.

Potholes had been another common issue amongst MPs from constituencies all over the country this year. Mr Clark said that when a pothole was reported to KCC it did seem to be patched quite quickly. He felt that this was the right approach as a lot could be patched in a short period of time.

#### **Questions for The Rt Hon Greg Clark**

**Q.** Why has there not been an advertising campaign about the new law that says a driver has to leave a space of 1 ½ metres when passing a cyclist? Drivers do not observe this law and leave insufficient space when passing cyclists, forcing them into potholes. Furthermore, the given definition of a pothole as 3cm deep or more does not take into account the damage done to bicycle tyres.

**A.** I agree with the points you have made and I will raise them in Parliament.

**Q.** It has been suggested that because repairs are now done with cold tar instead of hot, they are not as effective.

**A.** I will investigate the truth of this further.

**Q.** There were multiple appeals from the audience for more money to be invested by the Government in roads, given the money made by the car industry. The point was made that more funding should be given to Kent County Council to cover a whole strip of road instead of single patches.

**A.** Mr Clark thanked people for their comments and said that although he felt that patching was the right approach, he had noted what they had said.

**Q.** It is concerning to hear water companies announce that the cost of tackling raw sewage discharges will be paid for by increasing the cost to the bill payer.

**A.** I am very disappointed in the water companies for adding this cost to their bill. The regulator has been outfoxed by them. I voted against government to strengthen regulations relating to water companies.

**Q.** The incoming law on rental reforms does not represent the majority of tenants and yet it will apply to everyone.

**A.** This bill is designed to protect tenants who are subjected to bad behaviour from landlords. There will be time to debate it further before voting. You are very welcome to meet at my surgery to discuss this further.

**Q.** Will the upcoming boundary change impact our village?

**A.** No, I am pleased to say that the Tunbridge Wells constituency is the only one in Kent that remains unchanged. This will be confirmed in July.

Mr Clark concluded by saying that it had been a more orderly year so far in national politics than the previous one. However, with the cost of living crisis, there was still much to do. He was using his Private member's Bill to close a loophole in the law that it's not an offence to follow or harass women in the street. The experience of Tunbridge Wells residents who had visited his surgery had influenced this bill, as it was unacceptable that a woman cannot use the street in the same way that a man can.

Mr Clark was also a Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, which had recently held a session on Space and Satellites. He invited residents to visit the Houses of Parliament for a tour at any time.

Cllr Paul Curry thanked The Rt Hon Greg Clark for his informative words, and went on to introduce Cllr Norton as Chair of the Highways Committee.

### **Highways Committee**

Cllr Norton said that it was understood that the upkeep and safety of highways was important to everyone in Speldhurst Parish. However, the question was, what could a parish council realistically do to improve them, since Highways maintenance and road safety measures were the responsibility of Kent County Council (KCC), and enforcement was Kent Police?

- Although the Parish Council's scope was limited, it did have an important role to play. It had an important voice that spoke to various stakeholders, lobbying for traffic-calming measures such as reductions in speed limits. This could take years of work to achieve but the committee was committed to pushing on ahead.
- There was a Highways Improvement Plan for every village, who each had their own priorities. Despite KCC having little money and there being a number of regulations about what can and cannot be done on a highway, the Parish Council would continue to press these priorities.
- The Parish Council had purchased two Speed Indicator Devices (SIDS), which show what speed a vehicle is going at. These were moved around the parish on rotation by the Groundsman.
- They had installed gateways marking the entrance to each village.
- They had equipped volunteer Speedwatch groups and helped coordinate them.
- They were leafleting anti-socially parked cars.
- Residents could help. If concerned about speeding they could join Speedwatch. They could also report potholes and other Highways faults at <https://webapps.kent.gov.uk/KCC.KHSFaultsGIS.Web.Sites.Public/ReportAFault.aspx>
- The Highways committee were also interested in footways and cycle paths.

### Questions to Cllr Norton

**Q.** There had been reference in the minutes of a recent Highways Committee meeting, to a speed reduction from 30-20mph on the A264, with Tunbridge Wells Borough Councillors advising on implementation. What was the status of this?

**A.** Cllr Lyle answered this question, saying that it had been discussed and the conclusion was that a 30-20mph speed reduction was not feasible on this stretch of road. Cllr Sankey added that the involvement from TWBC had simply been an offer of assistance, should there be an appetite to progress the reduction.

Cllr Curry thanked Mr Norton for his update and proceeded to report on the activities of the Environment Working Group.

### Environment Working Group (EWG)

Cllr Curry spoke on behalf of the Working Group Chair, Cllr Turner, who was unable to attend. The EWG had been busy and Cllr Curry highlighted the following:

- Electric Vehicle charge points were expected to be installed at Langton Green Village Hall carpark in the next 6 months.
- The Working Group had begun a Biodiversity programme on its land in 2022, with a 3 year 're-wilding' trial at Pocket Park in Roopers, Speldhurst. Invasive species had been cleared and Bird and Bat boxes were to be installed.
- CO2 profiling was in place for SPC owned amenities; the aim was to achieve net zero by 2023.
- There was a trial on going Glyphosate-free at Langton Green Recreation Ground for the 2023 growing season. Alternative methods of weed control were being trialled in place of Glyphosate.
- More volunteers were needed to help the Parish Council carry out its environmental initiatives.

### Questions to Cllr Curry

**Q.** I was dismayed to see the grass verges stripped of their wildflowers recently – who was responsible for this?

**A.** KCC are responsible for mowing grass verges, but we are happy to represent your concerns to them.

**Q.** Have you applied to the Woodland Trust? They are giving out free trees and hedges.

**A.** Thank you, this is helpful information.

**Q.** Will you share the methods we have been using to replace Glyphosate, together with the results of the trial?

**A.** Yes, we will definitely share this information with you once we have an update on progress.

Cllr Norton added that the Parish Council was also trialling reduced mowing on a section of the Green at Old Groombridge. They were regularly inspecting and monitoring this space to see what new plant and wild-life species were emerging.

Cllr Curry went on to introduce Cllr Alan Rowe, Chair of the Planning Committee.

### Planning Committee

Cllr Rowe explained that the Planning Committee meets monthly. He clarified that the committee did not have decision-making authority, or any expertise in planning regulations. The committee acted as a consultee, just like any other resident.

When considering an application, the Committee tried to apply a common sense “layman’s” perspective, for example the potential effect an application could have on street parking, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or the greenbelt. Following a discussion, the Committee would come to an agreement as to whether to remain neutral, object or support an application. If they had a particularly strong view, they would reach out to TWBC, and the next step would be to ask a Borough Councillor to ‘call in’ the application in question.

Cllr Rowe added the following points for information:

- Planning notices: in the past, TWBC had sent letters to residents living in the immediate vicinity of any property where a planning application had been made. This was no longer the case, and notices were now posted in the general area of the application. Alternatively, residents could subscribe to the weekly TWBC newsletter to receive planning application alerts for their postcode.
- Members of the Public were always welcome to attend Planning Committee meetings. Sometimes, delegations of residents would attend to object to contentious applications that had the potential to impact on a number of houses; the Planning Committee was very happy for this to happen, because it helped Councillors understand more about the issue and reflect those concerns in their own responses.

Cllr Sankey added that the weekly newsletter Cllr Rowe had mentioned was not just useful for planning alerts but for other activities too, such as bin collection reminders.

There were no questions for Cllr Rowe, so Cllr Curry introduced Cllr Lyle, Chair of the Amenities Committee.

### **Amenities Committee**

Cllr Lyle said she was very happy to be at the meeting as Vice-Chair of SPC, and longest serving Councillor. In addition to her role as Chair of the Amenities Committee, she was also Chair of the Governance Committee, and was proud of the part this committee played in helping the Parish Council run efficiently. Cllr Lyle went on to give some key points of information:

- The Amenities Committee looked after various tracts of Parish Council owned land, including Pocket Park – mentioned earlier – where they worked closely with the EWG.
- They were also responsible for The Green at Old Groombridge. Last year they had installed edging to stop further erosion of The Green.
- Langton Green Recreation Ground was the largest area of land owned by the Parish Council, with the playground being one of its biggest areas of expenditure.
- There were additional small pockets of Parish Council owned land looked after by the Committee. They also looked after trees on their land, and recommended expenditure to Full Council.

Cllr Lyle concluded that it was particularly fulfilling to sit on the Amenities Committee since its achievements were so visible.

**Q.** I would like it to be noted how amazing it is to have Len Cooper as Groundsman for the parish, and how helpful and hardworking he is; he is truly valued.

**A.** Thank you for this, we agree that we are extremely fortunate to have Len and will pass on your kind words.

Cllr Curry then introduced Cllr Ellery, Chair of the Finance Committee.

### **Finance Committee**

Cllr Ellery explained the precept – the percentage of residents' council tax money which SPC receives through TWBC. The Parish Council views this as resident money, which it has to decide how to spend for the parish's benefit.

Cllr Ellery gave examples of how the precept was used including:

- The payment of contractors for maintaining and keeping safe communal spaces such as Langton Green Recreation Ground.
- Funding support for community organisations.

For the 2023-24 precept, the Parish Council made a small increase to the precept as it was unable to absorb all the costs itself. For a band D property the increase was 6.8%, so the average household (in Band D) would pay £73.81, up from the current £69.11. This was still competitive compared to other local parishes who had made increases of over £100 to their precepts.

There were no questions for Cllr Ellery. Cllr Curry thanked Cllr Ellery for his presentation and asked for any other questions to Councillors.

**Q.** Mr James Bowdidge, Chair of the Langton Green Village Society (LGVS) said that one of the most important amenities in Langton Green was the Langton Pavilion café, run by Mrs Emma Howden. Mrs Howden was unable to attend the meeting as she was looking at the proposed contract before the mediation meeting the next day. Mr Bowdidge said it was understood that the situation was not straightforward, however, if an agreement was not reached at the mediation meeting the café would have to close the next week to clear the space and meet the deadline for closure. LGVS therefore urged the Parish Council to extend the license on its current terms so as to have a reasonable period of time to iron out any differences and agree new terms.

**A.** Cllr Curry thanked Mr Bowdidge for his considered question. He said that he was unable to comment extensively at that moment, but that Mr Bowdidge's point would certainly be taken into the mediation meeting.

**Q.** The Reverend Lynn Trainor said that the issues at Langton Pavilion Café had also been raised at the Parochial Church Council (PCC) meeting. Reverend Trainor echoed Mr Bowdidge's point, saying that the Pavilion Café was a crucial lynchpin in the village, post-covid. If the pin were pulled, then the mental health of its users would surely be impacted. The Reverend Trainor asked the Parish Council, no matter what it took, to find a way to ensure Mrs Howden's Café continued to operate. Furthermore, Reverend Trainor was concerned about the Mrs Howden had been treated by members of Langton Green Community Sports Association, and hoped that Cllr Sankey would make the mediation meeting a safe environment for her.

**A.** Cllr Curry thanked Reverend Trainor for her words and added that he hoped the Parish Council's statement demonstrated its strength of conviction in trying to find a solution.

**Q.** Mr Jeremy Stirling said that he frequented the Pavilion Café with his Grandchildren. Over 200 people used the café each week, and half of them, as children, were non-paying, and the café did a fantastic job of supporting them. Since many parents brought their own snacks for their children, Mr Stirling argued that the café was actually a semi-charitable endeavour provided by Mrs Howden. There is immense pressure on parents with young children.

**A.** Cllr Curry noted Mr Stirling's point, adding that the Parish Council fully acknowledged that the café was 'Emma's Café' and its success was due to Mrs Howden.

**Q.** Mr Nick Trainor said that he was presenting his case as a friend to SPC. He made the point that as a government organisation, the Parish Council was responsible for acting reasonably. He said that at the most recent Full Council Meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> May, Mr Guy Lambert, Chair of LGCSA, had confirmed that LGCSA would take legal action against the Parish Council.

Mr Trainor advised that this was not a reasonable position for the Trustees of a charity to take. It did not align with the principles of the Charity Commission, or LGCSA's own articles of association which state 'we are for the benefit of Langton Green.' Furthermore, Mr Trainor said that to come to such a significant decision, the Trustees of LGCSA should have met formally, and the meeting should have been minuted.

Mr Trainor then asked the Parish Council to re-examine its relationship with LGCSA and for Councillors to ask themselves if they had been subject to unreasonable behaviour such as bullying or duress by LGCSA. If the Parish Council could not definitively answer no to this question, Mr Trainor would urge them not to proceed any further with LGCSA.

**A.** Cllr Curry thanked Mr Trainor for making his case. He was unable to comment on Mr Trainor's comments at that moment but the Parish Council would certainly take them into account going forward.

**Q.** Mr Bowdidge said that he had read Mrs Howden's leaseholder agreement for Langton Pavilion Café, and there was nothing in there to say that LGCSA could dictate whether SPC extended the lease. Mr Bowdidge asked if the Parish Council had taken legal advice on this matter.

**A.** Cllr Curry replied that as the mediation process was still ongoing, he was unable to comment further other than to say that the Parish Council was considering all its options.

The Chairman finished the evening by once again thanking The Rt Hon Greg Clark for attending, and also thanked all the residents who had supported the event.

The meeting closed at 9.15pm.

Chairman