



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

MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL'S ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

HELD ON MONDAY 4th APRIL 2011 AT 7.30pm

IN LANGTON GREEN VILLAGE HALL

PRESENT: Cllr. Mrs Lynn Jeffreys - Chairman, together with nine Councillors, and approximately 70 parishioners.

The following information was circulated to those present: Approved Minutes of the Annual Meeting dated 12th April 2010, Schedule of Detailed Receipts and Payments by Budget Heading as at 31st March 2011 and details of the Local Needs Housing proposals.

1. **Apologies for Absence** – Cllr Pendleton, Sandy Scott
2. **Guest Speaker: David Jukes, Mayor of Tunbridge Wells and Borough Councillor for Speldhurst**

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys introduced David Jukes as an old friend, Parish Councillor for 20 years and Borough Councillor for 20 years.

David Jukes gave an amusing talk on his year as Mayor of Tunbridge Wells which was illustrated with photographs from some of the events he had attended.

Cllr Mrs Soyke thanked David Jukes for his very interesting and informative talk.

3. **Chairman's Report**

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said this has been a year in which a clear sense of direction had been developed thanks to the findings of Parish Vision. It has also been a year when noticeable progress has been made with some projects which have been outstanding for some considerable time, the largest of these being the Parish Office. She explained that the Trustees of the Village Hall had recently received confirmation of the funding for an extension and the Council would take advantage of this to have the office built at the same time. It was due to be finished in six months.

Another project to come to fruition concerned the land outside what was once the Watson Hall. The safety of pedestrians was at risk when drivers swerved onto the pathway to avoid oncoming traffic, so the Council is constructing grass islands to create a barrier between the traffic and the pedestrians on the path. TWBC's Conservation Department will be making a contribution to the overall cost of the project as it enhances the Conservation Area.

Probably the most significant change to the operation of the Parish Council this year was the appointment of an Assistant Clerk, Meirion (Min) Flemington. Her appointment was made

because the Council realised how much it relied on the Clerk and his continuous presence and it would ensure there was depth of knowledge and back up.

The Parish Council was grateful for the assistance over the course of the year of County Councillor John Davies, Borough Councillors David Jukes, Julian Stanyer and Julia Soyke, PC Rachel Howson and PCSO Lee Jules of Kent Police. She also took the opportunity to thank the many volunteers who had helped with Parish Council projects.

She went on to mention that in January and February respectively Cllr Mrs Waters and Cllr Ellis resigned from the Parish Council. She thanked them on behalf of the Parish Council for their time and all the work they did for the Parish Council on behalf of residents.

Two other Councillors Richard Wheeler and Jennie Paulson-Ellis would not be standing for re-election in May. Richard has been a Councillor for nine years and Jennie for 20 years. She thanked them both on behalf of the Council for all their time and hard work they had given to the Council and the numerous Committees they both served on. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys then made a presentation of an engraved paper weight to Cllr Mrs Paulson-Ellis to thank her for all the years of service.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys finished by thanking all the Councillors and the Clerk and Assistant Clerk for their hard work over the year.

4. Committee Reports

Finance – report by Cllr. Parker

Cllr Parker reported that the Parish financial year ended on the 31st March and the papers provided cover the period 2010/2011 and they would be on the Council's website in the near future. He stated that a new accounting system had been introduced during this period.

Cllr Parker explained the figures from the carried forward balance to the established reserves and said that he would not go in to details of all expenditure because this would be covered by Committee Chairmen.

He did explain that administration now included some of the costs associated with the Parish Office and there had been a re-designation of some items that had previously been registered under different headings which made the total expenditure higher than previous years.

He explained that grants are split into two types – regular small grants and capital grants. Regular grants supported local events like fetes, the pram race, local churchyards and charities. Capital Grants totalled £40,000, of which £18,600 was granted to the Speldhurst Recreation Committee to provide the funds for Stage 1 of the renovation of the Sports Pavilion, £6,500 was made available to churches in Groombridge and Ashurst, and £15,000 was granted to the Trustees of Langton Green Village Hall to help towards the extension of the Hall.

Cllr Parker finished by saying that the Council finances were on a sound footing for the coming years.

Mrs Ponsford from Langton Green said that she considers many people are still aggrieved at the previous 98% increase in the precept and still concerned about contingencies and reserves. She also asked why there was not to be an election to appoint new Councillors. Cllr Parker replied that percentages were misleading and that the precept has now been reduced considerably. He also advised that if people do not put themselves forward to become Councillors then there is not an election.

Jeremy Stirling from Langton Green asked why the Parish Council was not doing more to encourage people to stand. Trevor Palmer of Langton Green pointed out to him that all the details are on all the Parish notice boards and website. Another Langton Green resident asked why the Parish Council can't advertise Councillor vacancies in the Courier. County Councillor John Davies advised that this is not realistic.

Alan Baker from Langton Green continued the discussion on why issues were not in the Courier. Cllr Langridge stated that he has been trying, without success, for a year to find someone to be the Courier correspondent for Langton Green.

Amenities – report by Cllr Mrs Jeffreys

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys reported that the former Recreation Committee was chaired by Ron Ellis who retired in February. Langton Green Recreation Ground is the largest asset of the Parish Council but it also owns other small pockets of land across the parish and the Council decided it was more logical to have a committee charged with taking care of all the assets, hence the Amenities Committee, which will be formed in May after the election.

She explained that about £30,000 of costs are allocated directly or indirectly on maintenance of Parish Council land, against which an annual income of nearly £5,000 is received from users of the Recreation Ground. An allowance has been made this coming year for work to be done to the Langton Green Pavilion and to trees in the parish.

This year a groundsman, Len Cooper, had been hired to help keep the Recreation Ground cleaner and tidier and an extra dog bin plus sack dispensers have been installed in the continuing war against dog poo. As usual several trees have required attention.

The Council had invested in a grit bin for the car park at Langton Green.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys finished by saying farewell to the Recreation Committee and thanking the Councillors who had served it over the years.

Planning – report by Cllr. Mrs Podbury

Cllr Mrs Podbury began by thanking the committee members and clerks for all their hard work and commitment.

She reported that approximately 150 applications had been considered by the Committee over the past year, which was a slight increase on the previous year.

The Government's Localism Bill includes major reform of the planning system and recent changes to the planning rules have already caused some confusion. She advised those considering a building project to start by taking a look at the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council website. Work on a property, or a new development may need to get approval under both Planning and Building Control – the web pages and a brief discussion with a Planning Officer should give all the information needed.

Cllr Mrs Podbury said that the Planning Committee is losing three of its longest serving members in Jennie Paulson-Ellis, Ron Ellis and Richard Wheeler and thanked them for all their hard work over many years.

Peter Ponsford from Langton Green said he considers the Parish Council container at Langton Green Village Hall car park to be an eyesore. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys advised that is acceptable to the Planners and would remain there.

A Speldhurst resident reported that the bollards at the end of Furzefield Avenue have been damaged. The Parish Council were writing to the developers.

Local Needs Housing – report by Cllr Wheeler

Cllr Wheeler explained that Local Needs Housing (LNH) differed from affordable housing in that homes are ring-fenced for local people either on a rental or part ownership basis. It is built on land where planning permission was not normally given. The developments are built and managed by a Registered Social Landlord RSL – English Rural Housing Association (ERHA) in this case - and can never be sold on the open market or swapped with other council housing. LNH is generally built on land outside the village envelope known as 'rural exception sites' where planning permission for speculative housing would not be granted and therefore land values are much lower. It is the lower land values that make the whole initiative economically viable and therefore 'affordable' to local people.

No sites can be developed without the approval of the Parish Council and Planning Permission. Building on these sites neither sets development precedent nor gives 'hope' value to building on adjacent areas.

It has been determined that a total of seven dwellings under LNH policy should be provided for the Parish in Speldhurst village. About 50% of these would be reserved exclusively for people directly associated with the village and the remainder for people outside the village but still within the Parish.

During the past year ERHA contacted the owners of four sites deemed suitable for LNH but only one landowner was willing to sell part of his field. This site is known as Site 15 and is along the Langton Road behind Ferbies, ERHA only intend to purchase sufficient land to build seven dwellings and the remainder of the field will be retained by the current landowner.

ERHA would be continuing their discussions with Highways to discuss traffic calming and sight line issues and a further public Consultation Day will be arranged to show specific architect drawings and planning Permission will not be sought until after this event.

Updates will be reported at LNH Committee meetings and monthly Parish meetings and the development will only be progressed with the full co-operation of the Parish Council.

Cllr Wheeler finished by thanking the Committee for all their hard work and support over the past year on a project that has gained a lot of public interest.

Peter Ponsford from Langton Green said the Site 15 is in the Green Belt and asked why the Parish Council supported the project. Cllr Wheeler stressed that it is an 'exception site'

Alan Baker from Langton Green stated that he supports Local Needs Housing as a measured way of providing new homes for local people.

Jennie Paulson-Ellis from Langton Green advised that 20 years ago all 'brownfield sites' were identified and all have since been built on.

Graham Williams from Speldhurst asked what happens to the price of the properties on re-sale. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys advised that all the properties on this site are likely to be rental rather than shared ownership.

Graham Smith-Tilley from Speldhurst said he has been preparing a petition which indicates that 80% of 136 households asked in Speldhurst are against the LNH proposal.

Ken Gornall from Speldhurst said he thinks the publicity for this meeting has been excellent but he was not aware of other meetings. He asked who would decide who gets to live in these houses. Cllr Wheeler advised that ERHA deal with all matters to do with applicants and selecting tenants.

Derek Robinson from Speldhurst asked who else would have a say on whether or not the project goes ahead and whether the Parish Council can have conditions put in place such as 'all the properties are to be rented'.

Graham Williams from Speldhurst and Jeremy Stirling from Langton Green both said they are still worried about exploitation. Cllr Wheeler emphasised that ERHA are a 'not for profit' organisation and are not commercial developers.

Peter Ponsford from Langton Green said he considers 'the village have given away the Green Belt'.

A resident from Ferbies, Speldhurst asked how many people from Speldhurst have expressed an interest in the properties.

Cllr Wheeler advised 14 in total so far with the majority being from Speldhurst village.

Environment – report by Cllr Brown

The Environment Committee was set up and held its first meeting in September 2010. It comprises three Councillors and three members of the public. The Terms of Reference include encouraging residents of the Parish to protect and improve the environment. Nature Watch and a list of Eco-Savers are now published in the four village magazines. Future considerations are Open Days, Schools Competitions and information on the Parish Council website.

Highways – report by Cllr Langridge

Cllr Langridge reported that the Highways Committee had been established in January 2011. Parish Vision showed that Highways issues are a priority and dealing with Kent Highway Services had become increasingly difficult in the light of budget cuts at KCC.

He explained that the Parish Council considered highways to be a priority and it had been allocated a budget to use if projects could not be funded by other means. He reported that the recent installation of interactive speed signs in Ashurst and Old Groombridge had been funded by KHS and by our Kent County Councillor John Davies.

Kent police have agreed three locations to carry out Parish Council Speedwatch exercises; by the Green in Old Groombridge; on the hill in Ashurst; and by the war memorial in Langton Green. Locations in Speldhurst were still being reviewed.

The Parish Council had also recently created its own anti-speeding signs which were placed on private land with messages relevant to the locations.

He reported that the Highways Committee was giving consideration to funding a speed limit reduction from 60mph to 50mph on the approaches to Ashurst and Old Groombridge.

Cllr Langridge thanked County Councillor John Davies who has been lobbying hard in an attempt to get the speed limit on the Speldhurst/Langton Road reduced.

Simon Norton of Groombridge offered congratulations to the Parish Council for being so proactive in respect of highway matters, albeit he considers that KHS should still be able to come up with some funding.

A resident from Langton Green asked whether the question of double yellow lines in Stonewall Park Road will be looked at. Cllr Langridge said the Parish Council will try again to get the traffic wardens/PCSO out here.

Trevor Palmer from Langton Green made a plea for a zebra crossing between the Twitten and the Village Hall. County Councillor John Davies said he will investigate the possibility with KHS but that it may not be possible for highway reasons.

Nick Critchlow from Speldhurst said a study was done some years ago regarding a crossing and walking bus and included traffic counts.

Cynthia Hemming from Langton Green asked if the speed camera can be moved.

Richard Larkin from Speldhurst said that speeds are at the worst between 6 & 8am and 6 & 8pm.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys advised that the Parish Council can only use sites authorised by the Police for speedwatch.

Parish Vision – report by Cllr Mrs Podbury

Cllr Mrs Podbury reviewed the project from its inception in 2009 to date. It had been the largest exercise the Council had undertaken and it involved numerous volunteers distributing and collecting questionnaires.

Traffic was highlighted as the biggest issue throughout the Parish and this has resulted in the formation of a Highways Committee.

She said that the youth questionnaire had highlighted a need for a tennis court and more things to do, hence the formation of the youth cafe and possible visits from the Street Cruiser bus.

She said there was a desire that the Council improve its communication and the Council had responded by issuing a bi-annual newsletter, replacing old notice boards, regularly updating its website and publishing monthly articles in village broadsheets.

Finally Cllr Mrs Podbury thanked the clerk and committee members and the many volunteers for all their assistance. It had certainly been a massive undertaking, Parish Vision had already achieved positive results, and it continued to shape policies.

Governance – report by Cllr Mrs Jeffreys on behalf of Cllr Pendleton

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that unfortunately the Chairman of the Governance Committee Cllr Pendleton couldn't be here this evening and sends his apologies.

The Governance Committee had been formed just over a year ago comprising four Councillors; Lynn Jeffreys, Julia Soyke, Trevor Parker and Chris Pendleton plus Chris May the Clerk in his role as Responsible Financial Officer.

The Committee did spot checks on the Clerk's financial systems, reviews all aspects of internal audit, legal documents used by the Council, its standing orders and develops policies affecting the management of risk arising in the course of the Council's business.

Peter Ponsford on Langton Green asked if the Governance Committee covers Freedom of information. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys advised that at present there is not set policy as all information is open to the public anyway.

Footpaths – report by Cllr Milner

Cllr Milner reported that he had been responsible for the upkeep of the Footpaths and Public Rights of Way for just over a year. He started by thanking all the volunteers who have given their time and labour; the 'regulars' from the Speldhurst Parish Paths Partnership (or Footpath Volunteers group) led by Derek Robinson and Ron Fisher, many other local residents (including Parish Councillors) who have responded so willingly to calls for practical help on specific projects. He also mentioned members of the AXA '70 Challenge' team and the Kent High Weald Partnership who have been involved in two of the biggest tasks undertaken and Jonathan Bibby of KCC for his advice and for providing the materials required for many of the projects and to the many 'footpath adopters' who have kept an eye on particular paths and advised of any problems requiring our attention.

He detailed the many jobs completed over the past year and projects to be undertaken during the coming year. He reported that a container had been installed within the Langton Green Village Hall car park for storage of tools and materials.

He said that maintenance of local footpaths was an ongoing process and dependent upon the resources and manpower available. The Parish Council is always receptive to any offers of help and any constructive suggestions which local residents may care to make.

Kent Association of Local Councils – report by Cllr Brown

Cllr Brown explained that the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) was a valuable source of Parish News, training for Councillors and Clerks and as an information service. There are 312 Town and Parish Councils in Kent and over 290 of them belong to KALC. Cllr Brown and Cllr Mrs Hull are the representatives for Speldhurst and attend the Tunbridge Wells Area Committee meetings.

KALC has an input on the local Strategic Partnership which is part of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. It can also have a representative role to Parliament, Government and other organisations.

Greg Clark MP spoke at the KALC AGM in November 2010 on the Localism Bill, which we are told will affect local councils or government. The actual effect of 'Localism' is not totally clear, but overall the message seems to be that parish councils will be encouraged to take over some services. A great deal of detail remains to become available. One aspect that was unclear is whether 'local council' refers to a parish council or a district council (or indeed a town council). It was clear that not only was clarification needed, but also many of the details have not yet been properly developed. Further developments were awaited with interest.

5. There was no other business to discuss.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys thanked everyone for attending the meeting.

The meeting closed at 10.08pm

CHAIRMAN