

Speldhurst Parish Council

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

MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL'S ANNUAL MEETING

HELD ON MONDAY 20th APRIL 2009 AT 7.30pm

IN SPELDHURST VILLAGE HALL

PRESENT: Cllr. Mrs Lynn Jeffreys - Chairman, together with ELEVEN Councillors, the Parish Council Clerk and approximately 22 parishioners.

The Clerk circulated the following information to those present : Approved Minutes of the Annual Meeting dated 21st April 2008, Activities and Achievements, Financial Statement, Pie Chart showing Expenditure for the year, List of Grants and Your Parish Council

1. **Apologies for Absence** – Cllr. Mrs Joy Podbury, County Councillor John Davies and Martin Steibelt
2. **Guest Speaker : County Councillor Keith Ferrin, Cabinet Member for Highways and Malcolm Appleby, Partnership Officer KHS**

Cllr. Mrs Jeffreys introduced County Councillor Keith Ferrin and Malcolm Appleby.

County Councillor Keith Ferrin invited questions from the audience and responded as follows :

Q Following the recent Government announcement on speed reductions, what is the criteria to have speed limits reduced ?

A KHS were waiting guidance from Government.

Q Borough Councillor David Jukes asked for consideration of 20mph outside the Parishes two primary schools..
A The problem is enforcing the speed limits. Speedwatch is a good means of deterrent.

Q What about traffic calming ?

A This can cause more congestion.

Q Speed limits are often not consistent i.e. go from 30mph to 60mph and then back to 30mph for relatively short distances

A Speed limits should be consistent over a reasonable length of road.

Q Problems with utility companies not working together.

A KHS hope to have this sorted out as from October 2009.

Q Parking and inconsiderate driving is a concern outside of the Old Watson Hall.

A As this land is owned by the Parish Council they were currently looking into safety measures

Q Pot holes are left in the road after work being carried out by utility companies. Do KHS monitor the roads ?

A Engineers are out and about and work with the utility companies. Every road is inspected once a year and busy roads more often.

Q How is KHS budget prioritised ?

A Maintenance work (pot holes) usually within 30 days of being reported and major works based on safety (injury accidents that have actually happened).

Q Can Old Groombridge have a village traffic survey ?

A This needs to be put as a request to the Parish Council.

Cllr. Mrs Jeffreys thanked KHS for the recent work that had been carried out in the villages including the safer crossing at Lampington Row and the resurfacing of the footpaths in Barden Road.

County Councillor Keith Ferrin advised that as from the 4th June (election) our County Councillor will have £25,000 to spend on Highway initiatives.

On behalf of the Parish Council, Cllr. Trevor Stevens, thanked County Councillor Keith Ferrin and Malcolm Appleby.

3. Chairman`s Report

This time last year we said our farewells to 4 of our most senior councillors, including our long-standing chairman, David Crundwell. I am nearing the end of my first year now as chairman and my admiration for David's sticking power has grown month on month.

It's also been the first year for our 4 new co-opted councillors – Peter Brown, Gerry Colley, Rosemary Hull and Ed Langridge who were appointed in June last year. Since then they have volunteered for new duties and jobs, attended training courses and contributed their informed opinions to our meetings and decision-making processes. I've long-since ceased to think of them as new, and I hope they feel by now that they're full members of the team.

Other council members have taken on new responsibilities. Jennie Paulson-Ellis has brought her years of experience on TWBC's Western Area Planning Committee to chairing the Parish Council's Planning Committee. Gerry Colley, after only a month on the job, bravely volunteered to be the PC's representative at meetings of the Kent Association of Local Councils. Julia Soyke now chairs the Finance Committee, as well as being the new vice chairman of the Parish Council, in which role she has provided me with unstinting support in my hours of need.

It's been a very busy year, as a quick glance at the list of activities and achievements will show you.

The highlight of the summer was undoubtedly the official opening of the new Play and Teen facilities at the LGRG by our MP Greg Clarke. The project took just over a year from start to finish, and was the result of close co-operation with TWBC, who applied for the £50,000 Lottery funding we received, and the invaluable assistance of our project manager, Maria Cook, to whom we are indebted for her efficiency and expertise and her ability to get us great value for money. Thanks also must go to the Rural Society for their grant of £5,000 to the scheme.

This element of working in partnership with other individuals and organisations is a characteristic of almost everything on the list. You will already have gathered from Keith Ferrin and the long list of highways projects at the bottom of the page that we are working closely with Kent County Council Highways Department throughout the year. You are probably all aware of the Speldhurst village "no" vote to the closure of Barden Road, but may not be aware it has led to the traffic survey of the village which may in due course lead to new measures.

Another Highways project has just been completed. The extension of the Lampington Row pavement has arrived in time for the start of the new term. This is another prime example of co-operation enabling a project to succeed, this time involving a resident, Mr Tom Shields, who owns the land, Kent Highways of course, and John Davies our County Councillor, who generously contributed funding of £5,100 to the project. Time and again he has proved supportive of efforts to improve safety and reduce speed in the parish.

Keeping to the theme of partnerships and co-operation, you won't be surprised to learn that our most significant working relationship is with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, and there's a good deal more to it than just planning. Returning to the list of activities, the conservation work is being carried out under the auspices of the Borough conservation officer, and the affordable housing survey is again a TWBC – led initiative. The idea behind it is to provide affordable housing for people with strong links to our villages in order to prevent us from losing our young people and just becoming ageing communities. Our next step is to find parcels of land which may suit, whether large or small, and if you think you can help, let us know.

We finished 2008 with two memorable events. In November a party from Marchiennes came across to mark with us the 10th anniversary of the Friendship Association between our two communities. We've been delighted that regular visits have developed between Langton School and the Ecole George Brassens, so it was pleasing to see Speldhurst School at the tree planting ceremony and we hope they

too will be developing close links with Marchiennes. My thanks go to Gerry Colley for all his work liaising with Marchiennes and hosting the November visit so successfully.

Then in December the Mayor and Mayoress visited the Parish Council surgery for tea, cakes and a chat which was greatly enjoyed by all the councillors present.

The surgeries are part of our objective to reach more members of the public, and have proved a more relaxed venue for parishioners and councillors to discuss issues of interest. We have a schedule of surgeries throughout the year and would commend them to you as a way of finding things out or of letting us know of anything you feel we should hear about.

One of our regular attendees at surgeries has been our PCSO Ray Nuttall. He's been an invaluable addition to the parish, providing us with updates on police initiatives, informing us of local difficulties and acting on many occasions as a problem-solver for us and for individuals in the villages. His help has been appreciated in particular by our clerk, Pauline, and our thanks go to him for his efforts on everyone's behalf.

With the same goal in mind of reaching the public we have developed a new publication. You may not have realised it but you are at the launch party of Your Parish Council, which we hope to send out to all households. This first issue is primarily explanatory, but we hope to keep all residents up to date with Parish Council news on a periodic basis.

My last words on the year are thank you`s, firstly to the councillors for the dedication they've brought to a job they've volunteered for, and the support I've received from them as I've learned to do this job. Finally, I know they will wish to join me in thanking and praising our clerk, Pauline, whose hard work and professionalism have ensured we have all survived this year of change.

4. Committee Reports

Planning – report by Cllr. Mrs Jennie Paulson-Ellis

Firstly I would like to thank my committee for all their dedicated hard work over the past year and to welcome two new members, Peter Brown and Ed Langridge. I would also like to mention Joy Podbury, who is not here tonight, but she seems to spend hours and hours on the TWBC website researching all the latest planning applications and that is extremely useful and saves us a great deal of time!

Despite the economic downturn we have been very busy considering only 131 Planning Applications which has to be a record low. These have been mostly in Langton Green and Speldhurst with eight in Groombridge and two in Ashurst. There are 3,000 Listed Buildings in the Borough of Tunbridge Wells and we consider those in our Parish as well as Tree Applications which have Tree Preservation Orders to protect them. We usually leave these to the Conservation Officer and the Tree Officer who have considerably more expertise in these matters.

We were very disappointed that when the Middlefield Application was approved we did not succeed in our request that access to the site should be from the A264 and not through the Boundary but all members of our committee visited that access and agreed that it would be extremely difficult for large construction vehicles to use it given the nature of that road – little more than a track in places and the impact on the Common with all its trees footpaths and nearby residential properties.

This Wednesday's Western Area Planning Committee will consider the Holmewood House and Bradleys Applications.

I am sure Speldhurst residents are pleased that the Bradley's Application is a split recommendation. In my experience of Western we never approved a Planning Application where The Environment Agency and Kent Highways recommended Refusal but I would recommend going along to hear the debate on both Holmewood and Bradley's – it should be very interesting and on that note I shall end my report to you.

Q What is the Parish Council's Policy on wind turbines and solar panels particularly on Listed Buildings.

The Parish Council does not have a Policy on this at the current time and responds to planning applications under the guidelines of the Borough Council's Planning Policies. Cllr. Jeffreys suggested that she would take this to the Chairman's Meeting.

Finance – report by Cllr. Mrs Julia Soyke

Background :

The Finance committee is comprised of seven councillors, all of whom give their time generously to consider the financial aspects of the SPC in order to give recommendations to the full council. As you can probably guess, there are various regulations and procedures that we need to be aware of, and these can change from year to year. In order to keep up to date, and also to gain knowledge on Best Practice procedures, members of this committee have attended Training Days run by the Kent Association of Local Councils, and been given very useful advice on the following topics: Preparing the Budget, Setting the Precept, Financial Procedures, Banking, Auditing, Risk management, Insurance, as well as the Legal aspects of VAT and Risk Assessment, the Code of Conduct, Employment, Village Greens and Common Land, and Charities. Our parish Clerk, Pauline Lambell, has also attended these sessions, so she can keep us on the straight and narrow.

Attending these Training Days had another beneficial effect: the Clerk had already discussed with the Finance Committee undertaking a review of our internal control and the committee agreed to the appointment of an Internal Auditor. At a training day in October a presentation was given by a qualified internal auditor and those Councillors and the Clerk who attended were very impressed and recommended his appointment to the Council. He has already spent two full days with Pauline going through all our records with a toothcomb. He arrived well-versed in all our parish council matters, having read the minutes of all recent meetings online (which all of you can do, if you wish). I am pleased to be able to report that his comments so far have been very positive, and the few suggestions he has given are being implemented. The Committee would like to thank Mike Garner, the previous Clerk, who has been acting as internal auditor for the past four year, for his guidance and assistance that he has given to Pauline during that time.

Financial Year 2008 / 09 :

Last year our precept was £99k, which cost a Band D property £42.04. The pie chart that Pauline has prepared for you gives a summary of income and expenditure for the year, and there is also a sheet showing the Financial Position at 31.3.09, which details our income. The largest item of expenditure was the new Langton Green Play Area, with exercise equipment, but we were most fortunate in being awarded a significant grant of £50,000 from the Big Lottery Fund towards this. We also have to thank the LG Rural society for their generous donation of £5,000 towards this project.

Financial Year 2009 / 10 :

Fresh from our Training Days, we have prepared the Budget for the coming year as carefully as we can, while still allowing for unexpected expenditure, and the precept has been set at the same figure as last year, £99,000.

Some larger projects will be needing financial support, such as the roofing work necessary at St John's, Groombridge. Ashurst is considering adding a small play and Picnic area, and Speldhurst Recreation Ground Committee are starting an ambitious, phased, Sports pavilion renovation project. In addition we will be in a position to help with smaller grants, as in the past, and we will look at each request for money according to its merits, and where there is a demonstrable need, and parishioners are to benefit, the case will get a favourable hearing. In some cases we are bound by government guidelines, and we will, of course, be careful to abide by these.

Recreation Ground – report by Cllr. Ron Ellis

With the opening of the new play areas, the recreation ground at Langton Green has been very well used. Most times when I am at the Village Hall (which is nearly every day) both areas are being fully used, either by nursery children at lunch time or at the end of the day by the children letting off steam from the primary school. The teen area seems to be used more in the early evening now that the evenings are lighter.

This year we have been fortunate in that we have had four new benches provided, three in the recreation ground and one on the grass verge opposite The Green, which is now owned by the Parish Council, opposite. One of the recreation ground benches was donated by Chris Burke, in memory of his son, who played football. The other two were donated by the Rural Society, along with the one near The Hare, to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Society.

Another pastime in the Recreation Ground is dog walking. A great place to exercise them but please ensure that any mess your dog makes is cleaned up and placed in the bins provided. That also goes for people using the recycling bins or people who are just using the benches for a quiet five minutes. People who do not clear away after themselves, requires the Parish Council to employ someone to do this work at a cost to you in the amount of Council Tax you pay.

Footpaths – report by Cllr. Trevor Stevens

The Parish has 50 footpaths or Public Rights of Way (PROW). It is thanks to the footpath adopters and the village volunteers that the PROW officer says that this group is the only such group in Kent saving £100's in contract labour. Various jobs have been undertaken in the past year; : replace stiles at Farnham Lane & Stone Cross, repaired others, 2 ton hardcore at Heathgate Corner and replaced boardwalk in Shadwell Woods. The past year saw the very sad passing away of a dedicated volunteer, Don Jeffrey. Other volunteers have also moved on and through notices in the Parish magazines half a dozen new volunteers have been found to enable this important group to continue to carry out work within the Parish.

Kent Association of Local Councils – report by Cllr. Gerry Colley

The Organisation

Membership of KALC now comprises 293 parish and town councils out of a possible 311 within Kent. There is a further sub-division into 13 Area Committees, and in the Tunbridge Wells area, 15 local councils – i.e. all of those eligible – are members. This, of course, includes Speldhurst Parish Council, and it falls to me to represent this area.

Finance for KALC is raised mainly through subscriptions from the member councils, but KALC is able to augment this by charging for courses and seminars. KALC also benefits from grants from other sources. Speldhurst Parish Council's current subscription is £985 per annum.

Apart from providing a forum wherein items of mutual interest can be discussed, KALC also provides advice and training to local councils on best practice, legal support, and offers its expertise in administration.

An Annual General Meeting is held in November. Last year, more than 100 delegates attended. A presentation was made by the Environment Agency, addressing the key issues of climate change, flooding, and scarce water resources. This was followed by a talk by the Kent Police about the role of the Police Community Support Officers.

In the afternoon, various motions were debated about a wide range of issues, including the increase in freight movements throughout the county, pollution and noise levels, planning issues, finance and auditing, and problems created by speeding traffic.

The Rôle of the Tunbridge Wells Area Committee

The Area Committee provides a channel of communication between local councils and the District and County Council on matters of general concern. As such, it is a forum for discussion of topics of interest, and seeks to influence the policy of the principal authorities.

Meetings are held quarterly, alternating between Paddock Wood and Cranbrook. There are usually guest speakers who make presentations on topics of local interest. In the past year, presentations have been about Pembury Hospital, finance and budgetary pressures, and public transport policy.

It is interesting to note that most other local councils also experience similar problems to ours with regard to traffic and transport issues, such as speeding, parking, and general congestion. Other issues discussed have included the provision of sites for travellers, affordable housing, and waste disposal and recycling.

The meeting closed at 9.20pm

CHAIRMAN