



Speldhurst
Parish Council

*Working for the
whole community*

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

MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL'S ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

HELD ON MONDAY 12th April 2010 AT 7.30pm

IN SPELDHURST VILLAGE HALL

PRESENT: Cllr. Mrs Lynn Jeffreys - Chairman, together with ELEVEN Councillors, and approximately 50 parishioners.

The following information was circulated to those present: Approved Minutes of the Annual Meeting dated 20th April 2009, List of Grants and additional financial information

1. **Apologies for Absence** – Cllr Pendleton, Christopher May clerk and PCSO Nuttall.
2. **Parish Vision – Cllr Mrs Podbury and Carl Adams from Action with Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK)**

Cllr. Mrs Jeffreys explained that Parish Vision was the most important exercise to be undertaken by the Parish Council in recent years and it was at the stage where the first feedback from the questionnaires had been received and handed over to Cllr Mrs Podbury to explain the progress that had been made to date.

Cllr Mrs Podbury gave a summary of the project and some of the work it had involved - Parish Vision was launched in 2009 with a series of Open Days where the community was able to come and express their views and tell us what changes they would like to see in the Parish, over the next five to ten years. Residents were invited to join the Parish Vision committee, which ensured it was a community-wide project. Action for Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK) gave guidance and advised the Parish Vision group of grants that were available, leading to awards totalling £1,750 being granted. County Councillor John Davies and Estelle Hudson, Community Development Manager at TWBC lent valuable support to the applications.

The information gained from the Open Days formed the basis of two questionnaires, one for the main householder and one for youths aged between 11 and 18. 1,900 questionnaires were hand delivered to every household and business in the parish, by more than 60 volunteers. The response rate was very high at 62%.

Cllr Mrs Podbury gave special thanks to Lyn Dollimore and Jeremy Syers for their exceptional contributions to the project.

Cllr Mrs Podbury then introduced Carl Adams of ACRK who explained that it was a registered charity founded in 1923 to offer help and guidance to parish councils, community groups and small businesses. He commented that community led plans are not easy to create and that they must be robust, inclusive and designed to meet the needs of the

community and to seek to better such an existence. The Parish Vision Open Days had been highly praised and a return over 60% was considered remarkable.

He gave a brief snap-shot of the analysis to date, which was just of Speldhurst village. The full results would be completed along with Langton Green, Old Groombridge and Ashurst within the next couple of weeks. He said that an action plan should be written up where as many local people as possible should be involved. He also said that Tunbridge Wells was the best borough in Kent for community support.

Cllr Mrs Podbury thanked Carl and his team for their tremendous help and support and reported that it is intended to give regular updates on what is achieved. A brochure would be produced recording the responses to the questionnaire, and this would be distributed to every household and business in the Parish. A prize draw was then awarded to three lucky winners for filling in the youth section.

3. Guest Speaker: John Davies, Chairman, Kent County Council and County Councillor for Tunbridge Wells West.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys introduced John Davies as a long time friend of SPC, who had joined the evening to talk about his role as Chair of KCC. She also commented that he attends many of our meetings and renders assistance to the Parish Council, both financially and through his position in KCC.

Cllr Davies started by saying how privileged he was to be both the Chairman of KCC and as a local County Councillor. The position of Chair of KCC is only held for one year but he said that it had been a wonderful year. Supported by his wife, Christine he had attended a huge array of events in Kent, the rest of the South East and in Brussels as the 'ambassador' of the County. He explained that Kent was a top performing County Council with a 4 star rating but it was not without its problems, however it was still regarded as one of the top shire counties. The relationship between the Leader of KCC and the Chief Executive – he explained the Leader sets the policies and objectives and the Chief Executive carries them out. There are currently 84 members of the County Council – 74 Conservative; 7 Liberal; 2 Labour and 1 Independent and he said that he had tried to ensure that the opposition members, which were in a significant minority, had a good opportunity to have their say.

The list of functions he has attended is far too long to record here, but they included charity events; award ceremonies; appeals; opening schools and other public buildings; supporting business initiatives; giving assistance to the young; the Kent Youth Games; graduation ceremonies; hosting receptions – the list is endless. He explained that his diary is full just about every day of the week but he has enjoyed every minute of it.

4. Chairman's Report

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that this year had been characterised by changes to the people of the Parish Council. Shortly into the new financial year the clerk Pauline Lambell informed the Parish Council she would not be able to continue in the job. Chris May was appointed to the post in July and, with no hand-over, put in long hours to learn about all aspects of the job. Cllr Jeffreys expressed her regret that Mr May could not be there to receive the thanks of the councillors for all his efforts.

In the autumn councillors Gerry Colley and Trevor Stevens resigned from the Parish Council, in each case due to changing personal circumstances. The Parish Council thanked both councillors for their time and all the work they did for the Parish Council on behalf of the residents.

In November Rupert Milner and Chris Pendleton were appointed as co-opted councillors. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys hoped they would enjoy their time as Parish Councillors.

The change-over of the clerk this last year had made the Council realise just how much reliance was placed on just one person to keep the Council functioning. Councillors decided that the prudent course of action to take would be the appointment of an assistant clerk to ensure cover in the event of holidays and sickness.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys explained that the work of the clerk was crucial for the effectiveness of the Council and recent years have seen an enormous growth in the amount of communication received by the clerk as a result the clerk's workload has grown. Cost implications were balanced by improved communications between the Parish Council, its residents, TWBC and KCC.

The Council was taking additional steps to improve its professionalism, including attendance at courses specifically for parish councillors, examining the work of other councils across the country, reviewing internal systems for areas to improve and exploring the possibility of the building of a parish office when the Langton Green Village Hall is extended.

Closely tied in with improving professionalism was the aim to reach more residents. As well as the major Parish Vision initiative, a logo for the Parish Council has been designed by Cllr Langridge and the website was in the process of being improved to make it more informative and more user-friendly.

The rest of the work during the year was along familiar lines:

- Work towards achieving various Highways projects which remain outstanding including parking restrictions in Speldhurst, the Speldhurst traffic survey an interactive speed sign in Ashurst and the necessary preparatory survey for another in Groombridge. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys invited members of the public to use the Parish Council to report Highways problems as this is more efficient.
- The Parish Council has been supporting the village of Ashurst in deciding on the best use of land adjacent to the village hall.
- The strip of land in front of what was the Watson Hall in Langton Green is in need of safety improvements and the Parish Council was currently having talks with TWBC's conservation department.
- The Parish Council was regularly in touch with many village bodies. Special thanks went to PCSO Ray Nuttall for providing so much information and support.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys finished by thanking the councillors for all their extra effort this year, and Vice Chairman Cllr Mrs Soyke in particular for her support and encouragement.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys then invited questions from the public:

Alan Passmore from Speldhurst asked if the Parish Council were getting too ambitious and in respect of paying for interactive speed signs (ISS), he also asked if the Parish Council would get the money back from Kent Highways.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys replied that Kent Highways Services (KHS) had produced a survey in Ashurst and in terms of points, it qualified for an ISS. However there were no funds available and it was not known when funds might be available. She also added that there are no guarantees of funding in the future and in the meantime, the village is concerned and shouldn't have to wait any longer, so it was felt that the Parish Council should step in and fund it.

Dr Lee from Langton Green expressed concern that he had not known about the increase until he had read about it in his Council Tax notification from TWBC. In his view it was too high.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that the Parish Council meetings are always advertised and members of the public are welcome to attend and the minutes are published on the website.

Martin Steibelt from Speldhurst asked why there was no explanation in the local magazine about the increase.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys replied that the Council had decided to produce a leaflet explaining the reasons for the increase which would be distributed to all who enquired but the leaflet had not been timely enough.

5. Committee Reports

Finance – report by Cllr. Parker

He reported that the budget is decided by the Council in December taking into account data of which it is definitely aware such as administration costs and annual grants regularly made to local organisations (e.g. village events, churchyard maintenance). A further sum is set aside for one-off grants which this year included £1620 to Langton Green Allotments, £1915 for Christmas lights in Groombridge and £6330 for a new footway at the end of Lampington Row to make a safer crossing point for children attending Langton Green Primary School. County Cllr John Davies was thanked for his contribution to this project.

Cllr Parker outlined the criteria for assessing grant requests, emphasising that each request is judged on its merits. Cllr Parker explained that unexpected maintenance and administration costs had reduced the surplus at the end of the year to £13,000.

Cllr Parker then turned to the 2010/2011 budget and acknowledged public concern at the percentage increase, which he explained as being due primarily to the need to restore the reserves to a reasonable level (£50,000), which could not be done slowly. A contingency fund was being introduced to meet unexpected calls on funds without using the reserves. There was also an increase to the sum set aside for grants by £15,000 as the Council was aware of upcoming projects such as the Speldhurst School nature trail and the LGVH extension.

The Council was aware of the need to keep costs as low as possible and used all measures available, such as renegotiating premiums, using in-house expertise and seeking grants. Cllr Parker thanked the Chairman and the Clerk together with the Finance committee for their support and good humour.

Cllr Parker asked if there were any questions;

Julian Stretch from Langton Green commented that the Parish Council had funded the fencing around the allotments and the allotment holders had not been asked to pay for it themselves. The Parish Council needed to look at how they spent the precept and suggested that the appointment of an assistant clerk and a Parish Office were not needed.

It was explained that the Council was vulnerable without an assistant in the event of illness or holidays.

Mr Stretch suggested that the workload should be cut back.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said that the Council was responding to what parishioners asked to do.

Alan Baker from Langton Green said that higher authorities have control over their budgets but the Parish Council does not and can just increase the precept at will to cover anything that it thinks needs to be done.

Trevor Palmer from Langton Green asked that having increased the precept by such a large amount whether this was in part to provide a reserve and contingency.

Cllr Parker said that this was the case.

Mr Phillips from Langton Green said that he didn't see why space couldn't be made in the Village Hall for the Parish Office.

Nick Critchlow from Speldhurst commented on traffic conditions on Barden Road which were as bad as ever. He said that no effort was being made to improve conditions. He asked where the results of the traffic survey were from the previous year.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys replied that the clerk had chased the results on several occasions and recently at a meeting with KHS.

Dr Lee commented that the new traffic calming on the Speldhurst Road (by the Twitten) was not used and that it did not calm the traffic. Another resident asked why the narrowing was not on both sides of the road.

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys explained that KHS had recommended the virtual narrowing of the road at that point and that was what had to be installed. The Council had to follow advice where road projects were concerned.

Planning – report by Cllr. Mrs Podbury

Cllr Mrs Podbury began by thanking the committee members for giving their time so generously, and welcomed a new member, Rupert Milner. She thanked Cllr Paulson- Ellis for her work as chairman and subsequent advice and guidance.

She reported that there had been a noticeable drop in planning applications in line with national building trends, but numbers had increased in recent months.

Speldhurst Parish is situated in the Metropolitan Green Belt and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Challenges lie ahead to protect this beautiful area in which we live, as pressures to build on it mounts.

A recent report produced by Natural England and the Campaign to Protect Rural England proposes planning policy should be modified, so that Green Belt areas can take on a more significant role, in providing an environmental resource.

The report confirms that the countryside around historic towns, such as Tunbridge Wells, is a vital, but fragile, environmental asset. The Chief executive of CPRE, said, “Where Green Belt land is underused, or in poor condition, the answer is to improve its quality, not to build on it.”

Cllr Podbury commented that the challenge for the future lay in ensuring that the Green Belt remained an important environmental resource.

Mr Anthony Bartlett from Speldhurst said that he was disappointed that the Parish Council had remained neutral when the last application for Bradley’s mill had come before them and hoped that they would be more robust when considering a further application, should it arise. He also said that nothing had been done to restore since the successful planning application and that the condition of the mill was deteriorating. He asked whether the Council could do anything about it.

Cllr Mrs Podbury said that it would be looked in to.

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 would not normally be given. In 2009 a survey carried out by ACRK identified a requirement for around 26 homes across the parish.

Typically only about half of any perceived need is built.

Langton Green is considered by TWBC to be connected in a ‘ribbon’ way with Rusthall so cannot under present rules have true LNH at the moment. At the present time 6 or 7 units are envisaged for Speldhurst. Cllr Wheeler emphasised that no sites would be developed without Full Council approval.

The LNH Committee have chosen English Rural Housing Association to be its Registered Social Landlord. An example of their work is at Gibbs Field in Leigh.

Potential sites (including brown field sites) have been investigated, and one landowner on the Langton Road south of Ferbies has expressed an interest.

Martin Steibelt from Speldhurst asked where the fourth site was that had been mentioned.

Cllr Wheeler said that it was in Barden Road.

Recreation Ground – report by Cllr Ellis

Cllr Ellis listed recent maintenance works which included new fencing around the teen play area, new bollards in the car park so that the footpath could be used and new drainage to stop flooding in the car park. He said that there had been a reduction in the vandalism over the past year but the biggest problem was dog mess and the Council was reviewing ways of dealing with the issue.

Footpaths – report by Cllr Milner

Cllr Milner had recently taken over as the main Parish Councillor responsible for the upkeep of the fifty footpaths and Public Rights of Way within Speldhurst Parish. His duties are to record and to facilitate repairs to footpaths in conjunction with landowners, volunteers and KCC.

He thanked his predecessors, Councillor Stevens and Councillor Mrs Podbury Jonathan Bibby of Kent County Council, and Messrs. Derek Robinson and Ron Fisher of the footpath volunteers for all their assistance.

He detailed the many completed jobs and those to be done in the coming months, and commented that the Parish is fortunate to have people who care about keeping the paths in good condition. He also noted the arrival soon of a container to be placed in LGRG for storage of the large quantity of tools and materials.

Mrs Bartlett from Speldhurst asked if something could be done regarding overhanging shrubbery on Speldhurst Hill and could it be cut back. Cllr Milner said he would look in to it.

Kent Association of Local Councils – report by Cllr Brown

Cllr Brown explained what the organisation did

- KALC stands for the Kent Association of Local Councils.
- There are 312 Town and Parish councils in Kent, and 293 of them belong to KALC.
- Each Parish and Town Council may send two Councillors to its Area Committee. We are in the Tunbridge Wells Area, which is made up of:
Benenden, Bidborough, Brenchley, Capel, Cranbrook, Frittenden, Goudhurst, Hawkhurst, Horsmonden, Lamberhurst, Paddock Wood (Town Council), Pembury, Sandhurst, Southborough (Town Council) and Speldhurst.
- Councillors Brown and Mrs Hull are designated by SPC to attend the Area Committee meetings.
- KALC provides a great deal of very good training for Councillors, and is a valuable source of information for Parish Clerks. Their services include training, legal and financial advice.
KALC can influence all levels of government and community groups.
- KALC's total income from subscriptions in 2008/2009 was about £120,000. Our contribution is around £1,000 p.a.
- Cllr Brown reported that direct action via KALC had resulted in a change in Speed Watch practice – letters are now sent to drivers exceeding 34mph whereas previously the level was set at 38mph.

The drawer then took place for the winners in the youth questionnaire competition. They were Jemima Floyd, Oliver Freeman and Alex Exall

Cllr Mrs Jeffreys asked if there were any further questions and Lyn Dollimore from Langton Green asked what income the Parish Council received from the village hall. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys replied that no income was received, as the hall was run by a trustee body.

A resident from Speldhurst asked if the Parish Council could do anything about the developer who consistently destroys the bollards in Furzefield Avenue. Cllr Mrs Jeffreys said the matter would be investigated.

The meeting closed at 10pm