

Kingswood Residents Association
Minutes of the Annual General Meeting
Held at Kingswood Village Hall on 26th March 2013

The meeting was opened at 8.15pm. Mr Gary Whitney, KRA President chaired the meeting and introduced the guests.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Ros Mill, Peter Allen, Stephen Gale-Batten, Lynne Sinclair, Chantal Cox, Dave Saunders and Valerie Evans. Keith Denyer and Barry Miles were also absent as they were attending a planning meeting at the Town Hall on behalf of the KRA.

The Chairman welcomed guests Mr Crispin Blunt MP, Mr Frank Etheridge, Cllr Joan Spiers and Cllr Simon Parnall from Reigate and Banstead Council, Cllr Michael Gosling from Surrey County Council, Ms Sheila Swanson of Burgh Heath Residents Association and Mr David Patel of Lower Kingswood Residents Association.

The Chairman commented that Mr Crispin Blunt had been invited to talk about Green Belt development. This was of particular concern in Kingswood as we are surrounded by green belt land and it is already known that at this time at least four areas are already being seriously considered by developers for potential housing development on green belt.

ADDRESS BY MR CRISPIN BLUNT MP

Mr Blunt praised the work of the KRA and the Council and said that the management of planning is the most important task the Council faces. The potential economic gains from development had to be balanced against the protection of the environment. In 2004, a new core plan for local development was introduced to guide development, subject to national policy. Since then the Council had been trying to obtain central government approval to its Core Strategy and was now on its third attempt with the Planning Inspector who had refused thus far to accept that the declared housing numbers could be delivered. The Council had had to revise the plan to address this and it was due to be considered again towards the end of May at an examination in public.

Mr Blunt pointed out that the whole Borough is situated in the Green Belt and declared himself absolutely against building on green field sites where opposed by the Council and local residents. He had been concerned that Planning Inspectors could overrule local Councils and localism to grant permission to develop Greenfield sites and had written to the Prime Minister about this and had received a letter in reply confirming that green belt policy was not trumped by housing policy.

The Chairman asked about the current draft plan and Cllr Spiers replied that it was due to be considered this spring and the Inspector now seemed satisfied with the amendments which had been made. She was therefore more hopeful that it would now be approved. The Chairman

expressed concern that nationally only 50% of plans are in place and that there was now a window of time when developers could take advantage and rush applications in before the new local authority plans were approved. Mr Blunt said that the national framework did still stress green belt priorities and he felt that for this Borough which is within the Green Belt the risk was small and it was only likely to be a short time gap anyway.

Mr Michael Gibson observed that there were thousands of vacant houses in the north, but everyone seemed to want to move to the south east. He asked if the government was going to address this. Mr Blunt agreed and said that the answer was localism. In areas where unemployment is high and people tend to move away, there should be a very liberal planning policy to encourage new businesses into that area. In Kingswood, unemployment was low but the environment was under huge pressure so a much more restrictive planning policy was required. Cllr Spiers reported that she had indeed suggested housing swaps to other regions so that for example recently arrived immigrants with no local ties might in this way be helped faster in an area with less pressure on housing. These proposals however had been rejected by other regions.

The Chairman reported that the population of the South East region excluding London was 8.6 million and London itself was 8.17 million with projected growth at 25% although in fact the region was already saturated. Cllr Gosling pointed out that demand for primary school places in Surrey alone already required 10,000 extra places which equates to 35 new schools with little availability of suitable sites.

Mr Guy Kingsbury asked about back garden development which he said goes on and should be stopped. He also complained that the planning system allowed builders to go to appeal if refused consent for multiple houses on one plot and since the appeal was heard by an inspector from another area, it was often approved. In such cases local residents had no right of appeal thereafter. He also pointed out that developers often build differently from what was approved and then apply for planning consent retrospectively. He asked why the law could not be changed to give local residents a right of appeal because they have no power and the developers win every time.

Mr Blunt assured the meeting that the banning of back garden development has been introduced in the framework document. He added that once the local core strategy is in place, any development not in line with it simply would not happen so this will deliver more power to local people.

The Chairman accepted the good intentions of the revisions, but said that the Planning Minister seemed to be saying something else thus giving mixed signals. Mr Blunt accepted this and said that that was precisely why he had approached the Prime Minister on the issue.

A speaker from the floor suggested that the increase in population was the cause of these problems and the London infrastructure would not cope. He said that whilst immigration from the EC cannot be controlled, the government could control immigration from elsewhere which would relieve some of this pressure. Mr Blunt replied that further controls on access to benefits had been announced only the previous day applying to EC immigrants and as far as the rest of the world is concerned there is now a zero immigration quota except for those with desired skills. The questioner pointed to the people allegedly coming for education purposes to bogus colleges. The Home Office was shutting down hundreds of these to close this loophole, but it required time as it involved changes to the law.

The Chairman moved a vote of thanks to Mr Crispin Blunt MP for attending the AGM and for supporting Reigate and Banstead Council.

RECYCLING

Mr Frank Etheridge, Waste and Cleaning Manager for RBBC spoke about the new recycling arrangements. He said that the Council first introduced recycling in 1997 with wheely bins and the black boxes for paper. Recycling was increasingly important especially as there was now a landfill tax of £64 per ton for dumping waste at Redhill. 45,000 households were now on the current recycling scheme and 10,000 tons of paper was recycled with a value of £100 per ton. Plastics, glass and tins were recycled at Edmonton and food waste was taken to Mitcham to be rendered inert and turned into soil improver. A new fleet of vehicles was in use now and the crews retrained. As a result recycling had increased from 37% a year ago to 52%. The next phase would introduce the scheme to 11,000 flats in the borough.

One resident complained that bins were frequently not returned to their original place after collection but left in the road or in the garden. It was conceded that this was a common complaint and not acceptable. Another question asked if the Council received any remuneration for the brown bin contents given that this was a paid service. Mr Etheridge advised that 25,000 tons of garden waste a year went to Hampshire to make compost but it was charged for as it was outside the service the Council was required to provide. The Chairman complained that paper waste was often dropped and not picked up. This too was a common complaint for which Mr Etheridge apologised.

Cllr Gosling reported that throughout Surrey, waste per head had been reduced by 17% in addition to the improvement in recycling. As a result, landfill was down from 60% to 20%. Food waste would shortly be sold for profit and eventually waste overall would make a profit.

MINUTES OF THE LAST AGM

The Chairman went through the main headings of the minutes from the previous year and these were approved. He reported that membership was now over 50%. He thanked Cllr Parnall and the team who organised the street party last year. He mentioned the suggestion that this might become an annual event to which there was little support. The Council/KRA surgery had been very successful and from that Cllr Spiers had arranged a briefing session on Kingswood planning which had also been very good. He thanked Mr John Lang for his hard work on planning issues throughout the year and for assisting those who had contacted him.

KINGSWOOD STATION SITE

The Chairman outlined progress on the station site consultation and the resulting planning brief and then asked Mr Desmond Camblin to report. Mr Camblin advised that there had been an excellent response from residents to the questionnaire concerning the site which had been issued to all households last year. This proved to be important as the scale of response immediately persuaded the planning authority that it reflected widely held views within the local community which should be included in the planning brief.

He said that a preferred bidder for the site Linden Homes had now emerged. He and Mr Whitney had met them twice and they had now seen the brief. They had informed the KRA that in light of the

planning brief, they were revising their scheme and would present this when ready. The brief has therefore already proved effective, although Mr Camblin pointed out that as far as is known, Linden Homes had yet to negotiate a final price with the vendor so it was still not certain if they would be the ultimate developer.

In any event whoever that proved to be, the future of the site had now been far better defined than was the case a year earlier. He thanked Cllrs Spiers and Parnall for their continuing help, the volunteers who had worked so hard preparing and distributing the questionnaire and analysing the results. He also thanked local planning professional Mr Richard Humphries, who had kindly helped with his advice and guidance throughout. Mr Gibson added that the survey results and the planning brief were both available to view on the KRA website.

One resident asked if the KRA committee was aware that Japanese knotweed had been observed on the site and asked if this would be dealt with prior to development. Mr Camblin replied that this had not previously been known and thanked the resident for reporting this so that it could be addressed.

LOCALISM

The Chairman reported that there had not been a lot of progress since last year. There had been a presentation to the Federation, arguing that a Parish Council would be an easier more effective way forward compared to a Neighbourhood Forum. The chairman suggested that if this were established, it would not affect the KRA, but would be independent. Working together with the adjoining RAs would assist with resources and Central Government offer a £20,000 grant to help produce local plans. He therefore invited the meeting to support a resolution to investigate and consider a Parish Council as an option in addition to a Neighbourhood Forum. A Forum had several disadvantages in that it was not empowered to raise money; its lifespan was limited to five years and it was more difficult to form than a Parish Council. The aim would be to have a proper organisation which would be the agency of our neighbourhood plan to work with the Borough Council on mutual planning issues.

Mr Kingsbury suggested that what was needed was a cost benefit analysis to assist in evaluating if this was worthwhile, and would not merely introduce another level of government with no benefit. He also suggested that it might be hard to find people to stand for election as the KRA struggles to find volunteer officers to serve at present. The Chairman replied that the KRA has no formal power in relation to planning matters and said that a local council could work with the Borough Council at a detailed level of planning. Currently residents have no official position whereas planning inspectors do take notice of Parish Councils. Resourcing would be shared between four RAs.

Cllr Spiers reported that actually Burgh Heath RA had advised her that they had not decided on this issue yet and she further advised that it would not be supported by the Council. She referred to the example of Horley which had been most unsatisfactory and advised that our community should “walk slowly” on the matter.

The Chairman said that the local planning department had been sorely stretched, but there could not be a neighbourhood plan without legal status. Cllr Gosling said that Parish Councils existed throughout most of the southern part of Surrey and suggested that they be consulted about their

experience. They seem to co- exist quite well in places and some Councillors sit at more than one level, but he pointed out that Parish Councils are about much more than just planning issues.

Cllr Parnall commented that from the discussion so far, the Chairman alone seemed committed to this proposal and asked if the committee were all equally in favour of it. The Chairman replied that the committee had made no firm decision on setting up a Council but had expressed the wish to learn more about it and supported the resolution to look into it.

The Chairman was asked if the residents could have feedback in the next two to three months with the pros and cons including whether the other RAs planned to support the proposal. Sheila Swanson of the Burgh Heath RA commented that her residents had all been sent a letter inviting their views before any decision would be made. They also had a Steering Group of 16 people working on this, but they were a long way from any decision yet.

Mr John Mill commented that last year's resolution seemed most remarkably wide as was the current resolution. He was concerned that it asked for a virtual carte blanche, yet he did not feel sufficiently informed to vote either way and he felt that the creation of a Parish Council must affect the role of the KRA. The Council already seemed to be doing a good job, so he would need to hear a great deal more from independent sources from outside Surrey and could not therefore support the motion at this time. He further commented that he did not see how working with other adjoining RA's would work. Mr Mill also observed that a resolution of this importance should have been circulated in advance and asked when it had been proposed. Acting Secretary Mrs Adrienne Light replied that the principle of the motion had been agreed at a committee meeting on the 5th February, but that she had only seen the first draft three days ago. Mr Mills pointed to the KRA rules requiring that resolutions must be submitted not less than 14 days before the AGM so that the resolution could not now be considered anyway. Furthermore since last year's resolution referred specifically to the committee members for the year 2012/13, it was now out of time and therefore no longer valid.

As the members also felt that they would like to understand more about the options and having regard to the challenge under the rules as to the lateness of the motion the Chairman withdrew the motion without it being put to the vote. Several residents made the point that in any event they did not believe the elected Committee required any resolution to look into the matter further and were free to do so. There being no objection raised this contention was agreed by the meeting.

TREASURERS REPORT

Mrs Light reported that expenses had remained similar to last year. Income was down partly because the main renewal season was in 2013 with 2012 being the lowest point of the four year membership cycle. Costs were up mainly due to a 15% rise in the cost of hall hire. Despite this the KRA was still in a fairly strong financial position. Although net worth was down compared to last year, in 2013 higher net worth was expected with the benefit of significant membership renewals recently completed. The Treasurers Report was duly approved.

ELECTION OF AUDITOR

The Chairman reported that Mr David Buckley was prepared to stand again for election for the forthcoming year as auditor. His election was duly approved.

ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN AND OFFICERS

The Chairman pointed out that he was acting chairman for this meeting as there was no appointed chairman at present and no one had come forward for that position. A list of the present committee and the vacancies was set out in Kingswood Matters. The existing officers and committee were duly re-elected.

QUESTIONS TO BOROUGH COUNCILLORS

Cllr Spiers was asked if any sites had been identified in the Core Plan and whether they were yet in the public domain. She replied that no sites had been announced yet and was resisting naming sites at this stage. She was concerned that once sites were named, owners would be pestered by developers. When the plan was approved, this information would be released to affected owners.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Cllr Gosling reported that the Surrey economy had grown by 3.5% per annum in the two years preceding last year. He said that Surrey County Council proposed to resurface 1000 roads in the next five years. In ten years' time, the number of old people requiring social care would absorb the equivalent of all the money presently allocated to roads and libraries. This was a national problem, but as a result the cost of care of the elderly in Surrey was running at 6% higher than expected. He also suggested that medical services across the County would in future be better co-ordinated which would both improve service and reduce cost.

The Meeting was closed.