



Esher Residents Association

MINUTES

OF THE ASSOCIATION'S 45TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING HELD VIA ZOOM ON THURSDAY
18TH NOVEMBER 2021

1. Introduction

The Chairman, Simon Leifer, opened the meeting at 19.30 and introduced himself and welcomed participants. He explained that the Committee had chosen to hold the meeting via Zoom as it enabled more attendees to be present while the pandemic is still in evidence. He explained the format of the meeting and subsequently that the meeting was being recorded for the purposes of the minutes.

The Chairman welcomed Richard Knox-Johnston, Chairman of the London Green Belt Council as the guest speaker. He explained that the ERA had recently joined the Council.

2. Minutes of the 44th Annual General Meeting

The minutes had been circulated with the meeting agenda and in the absence of any comments it was proposed by Simon Leifer and seconded by Paul Fielding that the minutes should be adopted as circulated. All voted in favour.

3. Apologies

Official apologies were received from Chris Davison, Treasurer.

4. Accounts for the year ended March 2021

The accounts had been circulated with the meeting agenda and in Chris Davison's absence, the Chairman outlined the current financial position.

With the Association's inability to collect funds via envelopes due to the pandemic, raising funds had been difficult and the financial position has declined. £700 less was raised this year in comparison to last year.

In previous years it had been possible to run fund raising events, but last year this was not possible.

Our newsletters are costly to produce, but they get good feedback and are attracting advertising.

The Chairman reminded attendees that a Quiz and Fish and Chip Supper is being held on 27th November and all are welcome. This will be ERA's first social event for a long time because of COVID and will be supporting a local charity, Oasis Childcare, who are based in Cobham.

There were no questions raised in respect of the accounts. It was proposed by Simon Leifer and seconded by Doug Fryer that the accounts should be adopted as circulated. All voted in favour.

5. Election of Committee for 2021/22

The Chairman advised that those listed below were prepared to stand:

Simon Leifer, Paul Fielding, Chris Davison, Christopher Goldsack, Rose Leifer, Michael Phillips and Douglas Fryer.

(David Young and Richard Williams, as Councillors, will be ex-officio members of the Committee).

The appointments were proposed by Peter Heaney and seconded by James Farrell. All voted in favour.

Committee vacancies

The Committee has vacancies for new Committee members and for a Committee Secretary.

Despite offering these roles to attendees, there were no volunteers and the Chairman asked that these vacancies be mentioned to contacts of those on the call, in the hope that someone might come forward.

6. Election of President

Peter Heaney, announced earlier in the year that he would be retiring from the Committee. He has been a member of the ERA for over 32 years and in that time served three terms as an Esher Ward councillor and was Chairman of the ERA.

He was chair of the full planning committee and gave a huge amount of his time elsewhere in the community, volunteering with numerous local organisations.

The ERA is very grateful to Peter and the Chairman proposed that he should become the first President of the ERA and this was seconded by Paul Fielding. All voted in favour.

7. Chairman's notes and report 2021/22

"Planning continues to play a big part in our work. The Sandown Park Racecourse appeal was heard by the Inspector a year ago but the ultimate decision by Robert Jenrick the Secretary of State, was not released until the week after May local elections. The application by Sandown was for a development on Green Belt of over 300 residential units and a 150 bed hotel. We had all feared the worst but were overjoyed when it was announced that the appeal has been dismissed. The Inspector's report was released at the same time and it was clear from this that he had come out very strongly against the appeal and perhaps had left the Secretary of State little room for manoeuvre. The appeal was undoubtedly being watched very closely by others wishing to develop Green Belt land so it was an important decision. It may have been an important battle won, but the war is far from over.

Last year my predecessor reported the power grab proposal by Surrey County Council that would have seen the abolition of the county's eleven district and borough councils and development of the County Council as a unitary council. It was reported that Surrey CC spent £250,000 of council taxpayers' money on their bid before having to abandon it because of an apparent policy change by the Government. Again, we all breathed a sigh of relief that local democracy had been saved, for the time being.

Another important milestone for the ERA this year was the election in May of a second ERA Councillor, David Young. I do not know if we have ever achieved this in our history, but it is certainly the first time in my memory. The ERA ran a very strong campaign and David won a very well deserved and emphatic victory and has proved to be a very hard working and passionate local councillor and we were delighted to have him on board.

Another hugely important milestone this year that I have already mentioned was the retirement of Peter Heaney from the Committee".

8. Richard Knox-Johnston talk

Some technical difficulties marred Mr Knox-Johnston's talk. He was able to deliver some of it and it turned into a very informative question and answer session. It was agreed that his slides will be circulated with the minutes – see attached.

9. Open questions

Local Plan

Bob Gladding asked what progress has been made on Elmbridge's housing targets.

Michael Phillips stated that the local MP said, in the last few weeks, that it could be 70% of what was being proposed.

Richard Williams said that Michael Gove's appointment had given Elmbridge some breathing space. His levelling up agenda meant that there would be more building in the North.

Ruth Lyon corroborated this view. She had attended a meeting with Richard Williams and Michael Phillips, at which Dominic Raab confirmed that if Elmbridge had been down every route, looking at brownfield sites etc, he would support a figure of 70% of the current target. Hopefully Elmbridge will look at its projections and produce a Local Plan that does not release Green Belt land or involve high densities. If Elmbridge does not have a new Local Plan, it will lose planning appeals (as it did in Thames Ditton).

Richard Knox-Johnston said there is a rumour that Michael Gove will launch a Regeneration and Planning Act in May next year, but until then little will change.

He also spoke about the lack of take up of brownfield sites, that they can be expensive to clean up and decontaminate. There is also an issue over VAT. It seems that Red Wall MPs are saying that they want their old industrial sites to be turned into housing. Land banking too, is a problem.

Michael Phillips talked about how Local Plans are already out of date by the time they are published. For example, Covid has changed peoples' work patterns and office space is in less demand and could be used for residential. Similarly, the High Street will be positively affected if people continue to work from home.

Richard Knox-Johnston said that Local Plans have been about housing plans and they should not be. They should be for the whole community and how the place is planned out and how the whole community can get best value from it.

David Young said that there is a lack of strategic coordination of planning and transport activities across the County and local Councils.

Affordable housing

Sue Citron asked what is considered affordable?

Michael Phillips responded that it can take the form of shared ownership, social rented and affordable where prices are discounted in perpetuity.

Richard Knox-Johnston said that affordable housing is 80% of the market value – unaffordable to lots of people.

Vision document

Richard Knox-Johnston said that the London Green Belt Council produced a report in November 2019, showing a future vision for the London Green Belt. It had originally been introduced to be open and prevent urban sprawl. Now there are many more reasons why we should protect it. Climate change, water, flooding, biodiversity, health. All are now important roles for the Green Belt. It is not just a place to be used for solving the housing problem.

Thanks

The Chairman thanked David Young for organising technical matters and Richard Knox-Johnston for attending and closed the meeting at 21.00.