

## **THORPE WARD RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION VICE CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS FOR 2016/17**

### **Introduction**

I will start by reminding you of the purpose of the Association. That is to improve and preserve the amenities of Thorpe ward and consider all matters of interest to the residents.

The objects include the nomination and support of the election of Independent Councillors. More than fifty years ago, the Association members discovered that this was a prerequisite for the achievement of its objectives and it is still true today. All councillors are theoretically answerable to those who elected them, not to the political party that managed their nomination. Nevertheless, Councillors elected under the auspices of a political party do, in practice, sometimes, have to act in accordance with policy decisions of that party. There is no doubt that Thorpe benefits from having Runnymede Borough Councillors who are all Thorpe residents, know the local issues, and are without allegiance to any of the national political groupings.

### **The Councillors**

#### Borough Councillors

Runnymede Borough Councillors, Linda Gillham, Elaine Gill, and Margaret Harnden retire by rotation. This year none is due for re-election, so I do not have to ask you to support any of them. However, I would like to express the thanks of the association's members to our hard working RBC Councillors. They do not always receive the appreciation they deserve. They are sometimes unjustly blamed for not achieving results, which are outside the powers, or responsibilities, of borough councillors

#### County Councillors

It is important to distinguish between the Runnymede Borough Councillors, nominated and supported by TWRA, and the Surrey County Council Councillors who are currently nominated and supported by the national political parties. Thorpe Ward is now divided for the purposes of SCC representation. Districts 3 and 4, broadly Egham addresses, are represented by Cllr Yvonna Lay, but districts 1 and 2, Thorpe and Staines addresses, are represented on SCC by Cllr Mel Few. He also represents Virginia Water, Lyne, Ottershaw and Foxhills. Whilst the division might be regarded as something of an anomaly, it does have a theoretical benefit in giving us two voices on SCC. SCC Councillors are all elected every four years and the election for them is on the 4<sup>th</sup> May this year. If you are not already on the electoral roll, the deadline for registration is the 13<sup>th</sup> April

### **The Committee Meetings**

The Committee has met ten times since the last AGM, and there have been open meetings before all of them.

Support for the open meetings is erratic. Some have been quite well attended, often where a single issue is of concern, but at many there are no non-committee members.

Time is spent at every Committee meeting dealing with routine items, such as road signs down, or obscured by vegetation, blocked drains, potholes, litter, obstructed

footpaths, inconsiderate parking at the junior school, and the like. The change in policy whereby the Lyne Lane recycling site no longer accepts trade waste is resulting in an increase in fly tipping.

When such problems are reported to the Committee one of the Councillors assumes responsibility for dealing with them. Where responsibility for dealing with the problem is known direct referral by residents to RBC or SCC is likely to yield the quickest reaction. Where responsibility is uncertain reporting the problem on "www.fixmystreet.com" may be easiest because it is unnecessary to identify the responsible authority, which is not always easy. Certainly, advise TWRA if the problem is not resolved within a reasonable timescale.

It does take a long time to secure action on some items. It is our policy to keep items before the Committee until they are resolved, or it is decided that they are incapable of resolution.

Whilst SCC is keen to emphasise its use of best practice in prioritizing highway works it does have a substantial maintenance backlog, which is the consequence of budgetary constraints. In our experience, SCC does give early attention to significant potholes once they are reported. Reporting them promptly is important, both to maintain the safety of roads in Thorpe, and to ensure that residents can claim damages if their vehicles suffer damage. SCC liability does not arise because of the existence of a pothole, but from their failure to repair it.

We are aware that for some residents the Council Tax charge is a significant financial burden, and the increase this year of 4.9% is above the rate of inflation. It includes a 2% precept which is ring fenced for Adult Social Care leaving 1.99% as the normal increase for Surrey County.

Concerns that it is not all well spent are frequently expressed in our open meetings. Whilst it is clearly very annoying to residents to see public money being wasted, and some certainly is, in reality there is very little that TWRA can do that would make any material difference. Although Runnymede Borough Council is responsible for collecting the Council Tax, they retain only about 9%. In round figures, of the remaining 91%, 13% goes on policing, and 78% on SCC. Most of the SCC share is said to be spent on meeting their statutory obligations such as social care and education. Very little is available for discretionary expenditure on other things such, as the maintenance of the roads. An aging population is frequently cited as an explanation for the financial problem. However, it has been pointed out that there are also other reasons, which may be more significant. A higher proportion of younger people are being identified as having special needs. In the past, many impairments requiring expensive care, would also have resulted in a premature death. Medical improvements now provide a more normal life expectancy, greatly extending the period for the cost of care must be met. Coupled with requirements for higher standards of care, and accommodation, there is no obvious solution. Rising Council Tax charges is a national issue. It is not a matter, which can usefully be addressed by a residents' association.

TASIS is not popular with all Thorpe residents but TWRA's relationship with them is excellent and we have always found the School keen to play a constructive role in the life of the village. Inevitably, problems do arise from time to time but in our experience there is always a willingness to negotiate a resolution.

I would like to take this opportunity to express thanks to a TASIS student who varnished the benches by the war memorial shortly before the Remembrance Ceremony.

TWRA also enjoys a good relationship with the management of Thorpe Park. As far as we are aware their activities are not causing any problems at the moment but please advise us if any are experienced.

In response to requests, summaries of Committee meetings are now posted on the TWRA website.

Whilst on the subject of communication with members, as reported last year, the old Independent, which used to be printed on green paper, has now been replaced by a section in a quarterly publication, Thorpe Together. This covers the interests of several Thorpe organizations. A major benefit of the combined publication is that distribution is shared and it can be produced to a higher standard including some colour printing. It is hoped that all residents do regularly receive it.

This change also necessitates an alteration to the Constitution because the reference to the annual Newsletter is no longer appropriate.

### **Flooding**

We are grateful to Samina Khan, the Project Director, of the River Thames Scheme for this area, and her colleague, Nathan Fahy, for coming here this evening, and for their presentation on the scheme.

Many residents subject to the risk of flooding will have high hopes that the proposed Thames flood relief measures will resolve their problems. Unfortunately, it is evident that whilst the scheme may benefit some it will not resolve the flooding problem. It was also clear from the questioning, that there remain many fundamental questions unanswered to the satisfaction of the residents. These, relate to both short term, and longer term measures to alleviate the risk. Further clarification will be sought.

There remains a significant risk of a recurrence, or worse, of the 2013/14 event. It is therefore important that everyone at risk has a flood plan. Pat Holbrook will be touching on this aspect.

A number of meetings with the Environment Agency representatives have taken place and the EA are seeking to formalise channels of communication in order to avoid multiple contacts. It has been made clear to them that whilst they can communicate with individuals as they chose, the TWRA Constitution provides that members and officers cannot communicate on behalf of the Association unless authorised to do so by the Committee. The only person so authorised is the Secretary. The requirement is for greatly improved two way written communications, in electronic form, through the Secretary. These can be much more detailed and leave a permanent trace. They can also be dealt with by individuals with appropriate expertise when it is convenient for them.

The provision of some individual property protection against flooding is now being investigated but it is evident that this has not been subject to adequate research in the past. Some measures that were installed at public expense are now being removed at public expense because they were inappropriate for the location. That is

less than three years after DEFRA funded their installation with a Repair and Renewal Grant, and no additional technical information has become available. It is therefore important that contracts make it clear that there is reliance on the expertise of suppliers of flood protective measures to ensure its suitability for the location.

The long awaited flood reinsurance scheme was introduced about the time of the last AGM. TWRA has not received any reports recently of difficulty in obtaining flood insurance, of unreasonable terms and conditions being imposed, or of exorbitant premiums being charged, so it is assumed that this is no longer a problem in flood risk areas. If this is incorrect, we need details of difficulties encountered.

Rivers are not the only source of floodwater and Pat Holbrook will be mentioning drains.

### **Administration of TWRA**

It is thought that with one exception, the administration of TWRA is now working well. The exception is membership enrolment and retention, which is dealt with below. If members have a different view, it would be helpful if they would bring any weaknesses to the attention of the Secretary so that they can be addressed.

### **Secretary**

I would like to express particular thanks to Pat because I am more aware than most how dependent TWRA, and your vice Chairman, is on her, and I do know that her life is still not without its medical challenges. She does an excellent job involving a wide range of activities.

### **Treasurer**

We are also fortunate now to have Ian Patenall, as an experienced Treasurer, looking after our finances. The bookkeeping and membership records are now in excellent order and Ian will be reporting later.

### **Planning**

Bob Hudson, our Planning Secretary, has continued to do an excellent job. Thanks to Bob the Committee is kept informed of all planning applications in the ward. Where it is considered that an application is likely to be contrary to the best interests of the residents in general, and a valid planning objection can be identified, an objection is formally lodged. The power of Borough Councillors to reject planning applications is very limited. The grounds for rejection are determined by statute and where an applicant successfully appeals RBC incurs costs. Do not rely on TWRA or your Councillors. It is important that if residents do feel strongly about an application they write expressing their personal views. The more letters or emails the better. To influence the out-come it is vital to base the objection on valid statutory grounds which are clearly set out on the web.

I will leave it to Bob to report more fully to the extent that he wishes.

Located outside the ward, but still likely to have some effect on it, the Milton Park Farm gravel extraction application is still awaiting decision.

## **Neighbourhood Forum**

I reported last year that the devolvement of some planning decisions from Runnymede Borough Council to local residents was under investigation. That has progressed significantly. At this point, I would like to ask Nigel Robbins to bring us up to date on the Neighbourhood Plan, which is being developed by the Neighbourhood Forum.

## **Membership**

In my opinion, our recent history of recruiting new members and history of retaining them is an administrative weakness. To be credible as a representative body for Thorpe TWRA needs to be able to demonstrate that a high proportion of residents are members. The reality is that of more than 2000 potential membership households 301 are members based on the figures available in March. This is a small improvement on last year, but of last year's membership, 72 have yet to renew their subscriptions, despite two reminders. We do not understand the reason for this and if anyone who was a member last year has only paid their renewal subscription tonight, it would be helpful to know the reason. We do know that knocking on doors and inviting membership has good results. When membership subscriptions were collected that way, membership was much higher. Unfortunately, we no longer have the resources to do this. We can attempt to rebuild membership numbers gradually over several years but if the annual lapse rate is going to be about 25%, even where we have email addresses, that is not going to be practicable, so we do need to know how to reduce it. The cost of £5 per year, £2 for pensioner households, is unlikely to be a deterring factor.

The timetable in the Constitution for the payment of subscriptions was based on the days of door-to-door collection, which then took place over a prolonged period. Now there is reliance on members initiating payment, it has been decided that shortening the period will facilitate collection. That is the subject of the other constitutional change tonight.

A few households may not have access to email, but most have. Some members choose not to provide their email addresses but where we have them we do use email to give notice of local matters that we think may be of interest to members. These include security related messages that we are requested to circulate by the police.

## **The Web Site**

Nigel Robbins is now administering the TWRA web site. This can be found at <http://www.surreycommunity.info/mygroup/>. There is also experimentation with Facebook.

## **Village Improvements**

Most residents take pride in the appearance of the village and a Community Gardening Group has been formed. Ian Patenall and Ken Cooper are the principal members but more volunteers would be welcome.

If we had more members of the Association, and more on the Committee we could use the financial and human resources to do more. It is in your interest to make sure your neighbours are members!

### **Thanks to Committee Members and Reference to Possible new Members**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the members of the Committee for their support, and the effort they have dedicated to the Association. During the year, we have lost Debbie Foster but we have gained Nigel Robbins who has proved to be an enthusiastic and active member of the Committee. Mick Bett resigned on moving out of the country, but has been replaced by John Arcay, also a master at TASIS, as well as being a resident of Thorpe.

Other Committee members, not otherwise mentioned in this report, are Carole James, Bill Bessant, and Mercer Bolds. Mercer in particular has an encyclopaedic knowledge of Thorpe over very many years.

We still need more Committee members. The real worth of the Committee members is the effort that is put in outside the meetings.

I have already referred to our RBC Councillors. I should clarify that although they all attend Committee Meetings, when they are available, they are not members of the Committee. Nevertheless, they do take on jobs for TWRA that they really should not need to do.

The office of Chairman remains unfilled, but I am hopeful that at the next Committee meeting in a few days, this will be remedied with the appointment of someone willing and able to devote more time and energy to your association than I can do. He also lives in Thorpe, and is much younger!

Ray Walker,  
Vice Chairman