

Minutes of Merton Park Ward Residents' Association Open Committee Meeting

4th June 2019

Present: Councillor Peter Southgate, Councillor Edward Foley, Councillor Dickie Wilkinson, Hubert Child, Bryan Anderson, Pauline Southgate, David Merriman, Ian Garbett, Desé Child, Graham Clark, Stephen Mercer, Jolanta Nowak, Fred Rayner, Greg Bryant, Ingrid Holtz.

1. Hubert Child, Chairman, opened the meeting and passed on apologies from Chris Strutt, Phillip McNamara and Pippa Foskett.
2. The Chairman sought confirmation that the minutes of the previous meeting were correct before signing these. There were no matters arising.
3. This item was the "Open" part of the meeting where the audience was invited to raise issues of concern to them.

- **Traffic management in Dorset Road** - Parents at Park Community School have raised a number of deep concerns regarding the dangers to their children posed by road traffic and pollution. An email had been sent to the independent councillors today about this matter in advance of the meeting. The location of the school and the behaviour of some motorists has created the potential for serious accidents. It was claimed that every single day there is some sort of incident near to the school. Representatives from Merton Council met with parents at the school over a year ago but since then there has been a lack of response to parental concerns and of action to address these. Various possible actions to reduce the problems were suggested, the main ones being speed checks, speed humps and the installation of a zebra crossing. So far, all that has been done is the installation of an electronic sign but unfortunately this is hidden behind a tree and does not work (it does not flash). Councillor Southgate said that the police have effectively ruled out a crossing on the grounds that it does not meet the criteria because the road is "too quiet". Effectively it does not have a sufficiently high volume of traffic to warrant such a crossing. Guidelines say that reasons for their decision should be given and while the police have said that they have addressed this, parents at the meeting disputed it and said that they had not been given these reasons. These parents feel that the police have not given them the real reason, which is believed to be the cost, especially in the light of other pressure on police resources recently coupled with funding cuts. Councillor Southgate said that failure to meet the criterion referred to above, rather than the approximate £25,000 cost, is the reason why the police have declined the installation of such a crossing. Councillor Foley has had meetings with the police and been present at some speed checks in the area and reported that while some of those people speeding were youngsters, some were also parents of children at the school who were late in their drop off, which is rather embarrassing. He said to leave the matter with him and he will try to work out a solution. One final suggestion from the audience was to reconfigure the junction

layout by the school, that is, the junction of Dorset Road and Morden Road.

- **Rules regarding the construction of “Garden Rooms”.** The issue of what rules there are regarding additional building in gardens was raised. Plans have been drawn up to construct a “Garden Room” in an empty property giving rise to concerns by the residents in an adjacent house that this will enable the house to become a house of multiple occupation (of three families). Councillor Southgate said that regulations state that garden rooms **may** be used for sleeping but only by family members, so this may provide some reassurance. However, in this particular situation there is a prospect that the families may be directly related (brothers?). Councillor Southgate replied that the route to pursue then could be the “over-occupation” legal route. Also, planners may preclude such use by refusing rear access to the garden room except via the house. There are measures already in place to restrict over-development and protect garden size and to limit the size of any such garden room, both relatively and absolutely. The percentage remaining as garden after construction must be a minimum of 50% and there are also regulations regarding the actual dimensions of a garden room. Councillor Southgate said that perhaps the best way forward to prevent over-development would be for sufficient adjacent residents to put in objections to the plans already distributed so that the matter would have to be referred to the Planning Committee. This route assumes that the plans would not have been automatically rejected by the planning department when formally submitted initially.
- **Parking and “Essential User” parking permits** – concerns were raised that council employees in possession of essential user permits are increasingly parking in local roads and displacing residents who would otherwise use these parking spaces. A quick look on one day in Abbotsbury Road (which is just outside Merton Park Ward) showed that 12 out of the available 16 parking spaces were occupied by vehicles displaying these permits on one side of the road. On the other side of the road 4 out of the 7 available spaces were also taken up by such permit holders. Obviously, this severely restricted the number of spaces available for residents and they are reluctant to move their car from any parking space during the day because it would almost certainly not be possible to park on the road on their return. A similar pattern was seen in Poplar Road. Concerns were expressed that more residents would subsequently convert their front gardens to hard standing so that they could be sure of a parking space. It was also noted that the introduction of digital permits would make it harder to monitor which parked cars belong to essential users. The question of whether these permit holders are all really **essential** users was posed along with another asking whether the 2016 and 2017 surveys had been completed. Councillor Southgate said that a few roads (including Wessex Avenue) had special dispensation prohibiting permit holders from parking along those roads. He also responded to a question regarding the rules about these permits

for council employees by quoting some statistics regarding the number of such permit holders:

2016-2017 there were 518 essential car users in Merton Park
2017-2018 there were 319 essential car users in Merton Park
2018-2019 there were 378 essential car users in Merton Park

Councillor Southgate also reported that these permits have to be requested for employees by level 2 or 3 managers (i.e. senior managers). The permits cost £212 and are paid for out of each department's budget. Specific conditions must be met to qualify for a permit but once granted individual permits tend not to be reviewed each year. However, an overall review is currently underway to tighten up and determine whether users really are **essential** users with an expectation that this will lead to a dramatic reduction in the number of permits. The intention of the review is clearly to reduce the number of permits. It was acknowledged that once the Grasmere Avenue CPZ comes into force the pressure on parking spaces will increase. Pressure on parking has also increased because outlying offices have been closed and employees re-located to Crown House. Some NHS staff are now also located on the top floor of Crown House. One suggestion was that perhaps the council could allocate spaces in its own car parks for permit holders but it was unclear whether this was regarded as a real solution.

- **Broken paving stones** – pavements are becoming dangerous to walk on because of work carried out on private houses. Should this not be the responsibility of the resident employing builders for home improvements? Not only does the damage pose a danger to pedestrians but it is annoying and expensive to repair. One issue is that of “proving” that the damage was caused by the relevant contractors. After it has been reported the response from the council is often too slow to allow the case against the contractor to be built effectively. The issue of getting the slabs repaired, however, is different from the issue of pinning down responsibility for the damage. Repairs have to be made to prevent accidents and so the council **will** do repairs **but** will only repair slabs that protrude at least 20 millimetres. Loose slabs that do not protrude this far (but which may still be dangerous) are not repaired so it appears that the council are trying to wriggle out of some repairs, probably because of lack of resources. One suggestion that appeared to meet with approval at the meeting was that planning permission should be given only on the proviso that any such damage be repaired- photos could be taken before and after the building work. This would be particularly important for major projects. Currently inspections at the end of projects only focus on the property itself and whether work has been done to the required standard. They do not look at public areas, such as pavements. Moreover, such inspections are not always undertaken by the council because the owner of the property can employ an approved private firm instead. Another suggestion was that the council could require an initial deposit that would only be refunded at the end of the project after any damage had been repaired. A potential problem with this is that councils are subject to central government regulations that could make it illegal to require such a deposit. Councillor

Southgate said that he would talk to planners to suggest that repairs for damage caused should be written into planning permission.

- **Cashless payment at the new leisure centre** – If you wish to swim at this new facility you have to pay by credit or debit card and may not pay by cash. This may deter children and young people from using the facility because they do not have such a card. Ironically, payment for lockers is by coins! The cashless policy is not the decision of the council but of the contractor that runs the centre (GRO). However, it appears that other centres run by GRO **will** accept cash payment, such as Putney and Wimbledon centres
 - **Rotten fencing around Merton Park tram stop** – this needs to be repaired, or at least removed, because it is an eyesore and encourages litter. The council has argued that this is the responsibility of TFL but is this really the case? TFL has shown no inclination to deal with it. Perhaps removing the fence is the best way forward since repairs would be very expensive and Councillor Southgate said that he would raise this with the council.
 - **Three-minute plea by Clayton Scott**- this was a soap box item to enlist support to petition the council regarding the new proposed charges for use of the tennis courts in John Innes Park, which currently charges no fee. The proposed charge is £8 per hour with an on-line booking system that provides a passcode to gain entry to the courts. This will then be rolled out to other tennis courts in the borough. Mr Scott posed two questions. Is this a policy just to raise money? Have the implications been widely understood? He said that the council has not surveyed residents nor looked at the implications of the policy. It will deter families from using the facilities and more especially children, which is not desirable given the need to increase their activity levels etc. While £8 per hour is the same as some other boroughs, three sets of courts in Croydon charge only £6.50 and courts are free in Sutton. Mr Scott asked for those present to sign his petition asking the council to adopt the same system as used in Kingston and Richmond. Under this scheme households pay a lump sum of £50 per annum, which is obviously significantly cheaper for those who pay tennis at the courts on a regular basis. After Mr Scott had finished Councillor Southgate clarified the current situation because it is not quite as it may appear. Council policy had always been to charge for courts, including those in John Innes Park but latterly it has not been cost effective to enforce the charge. The new “electronic” system gets over this issue.
4. PC John Weatherhead was not present so there was no Neighbourhood watch or Police Liaison report.
 5. **Councillor Foley** gave his report. After a meeting in the council chamber he has now formally been appointed as Deputy Mayor and has already undertaken various official duties. He attended the Council Dog Show in Morden Park meeting with local school pupils and dogs and also attended a light opera in Wimbledon Village. He will be giving his first citizenship session at Morden Registry Office tomorrow and will be visiting a hospice, so he has been very busy. With regard to his work on the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel, he has been able to get some response to an email he sent regarding a particular case. After five years in the role he now knows who to go to in particular situations to get the quickest response. With regard to the

previously mentioned issue of loose and uneven paving slabs he knows that it has not been sorted and said it is a shame because it is one of the main reasons why older people do not go outside. He ended his report by saying that the speed watches have not taken place so often recently but will resume their frequency. Being present at these can be embarrassing for him when he personally knows the people who are caught speeding!

Councillor Wilkinson then gave his report. He has received an email regarding the boundary review and he had got the process slightly wrong. Apparently, the next stage is to have a consultation of community groups. It is an on-line consultation that shows the current boundaries and the number of residents within each of them. Respondents then have the opportunity to suggest how the boundaries should be withdrawn. MPWRA will put in a group response. The consultation ends in August and recommendations will follow in December after which there will be a second consultation before the final decision in May 2020. He still thinks that Merton Park will be relatively unaffected because there is much more imbalance in other wards. He will put a link to the relevant website (igbce.org.uk) on the MPWRA website. He ended his report by sharing his idea to launch a green initiative. He has put some ideas on a sheet that was available to collect at the end of the meeting. While re-cycling is one way to help us become a greener borough, the main problem is that we consume too much in the first place so creating a huge amount of packaging. His sheet provides some statistics regarding how much plastic the average person produces because of what they consume. He quoted examples of plastic water bottles and plastic toothbrushes (bamboo would be a more environmentally friendly substitute for the latter). He will put this sheet onto the MPWRA website. He asked that we all think what our own households could do in the future to reduce our consumption in order to reduce the amount of plastic waste produced. He suggested that local schools be approached to get them involved, although there was no discussion at the meeting of who might do this or when. He proposed that his sheet, plus our suggestions, will effectively become the borough's "Green Charter".

Councillor Southgate closed this agenda item with his report. He provided a slide showing the results of the survey on how to spend the £5,000 available for local improvements. Respondents had been asked to select three of the eleven highly prescribed choices. 110 people responded and there was a relatively clear pattern in their responses. The top three choices in order of preference were: grants for volunteer clean ups (48%); cutting back of highway overhanging vegetation (47%); bulb planting (43%) Preferred areas for the clean ups and clearing included the path between Dorset Road and either Merton Park tram stop or Melbourne Road via the Tram line crossing (8 nominations). Other areas nominated were Kenley Road to Morden town centre and Dorset Road to Erridge Road and Wessex Avenue, alongside the Old Ruts sports ground (2 nominations each). Suggested locations for bulb planting were Mostyn Gardens (14 nominations) and Kendor Gardens (8) while John Innes Park and the grass verge in Bakers End received 4 nominations each. Responses appear to have been influenced by the limited funds

available and what would have most impact within that constraint. The top three choices will now be put forward to the council after our three councillors have discussed how to allocate the money between the three projects.

The response to the questionnaire regarding proposed car parking changes was overwhelming with 3,000+ replies! It should have gone to cabinet by now but all these responses need to be analysed first so there will be a delay in this.

Councillor Southgate ended by showing a table of the results of the most recent residents' survey. This will be attached to the minutes for information. In summary, some things are working out quite well whereas satisfaction with certain other aspects of council provision has deteriorated. These latter aspects are: perceived value for money; being kept informed; acting on residents' concerns; council funds and benefits. The Local Government Association undertakes a similar survey and gets similar results; finding cuts appear to be having a real impact at local level generally. Merton's results show that the satisfaction with those services now run by Veolia (street cleaning, refuse collection) has fallen over the last year. Councillor Southgate remarked that it was disappointing that the council did not learn from the experience of Sutton which went down this route earlier. So, people are less happy with the provision of **basic** services and lack of communication is a real problem. However, there is some good news too. Satisfaction with libraries and education has held up and people appear to value these services. Volunteer support for libraries is much appreciated and a very large number of volunteers help with this (over 700?).

6. Just before the Chairman ended the meeting Stephen Mercer requested a few minutes of time to raise a point about bicycle parking and security. He had cycled to the meeting but could not find a space in the school to store his cycle securely. He asked where the children stored their cycles and was told by a member of the audience that racks were available in the school but were not visible from the front entrance. Although there is no provision to lock the cycles away the school gates are closed during during the day so they are secure. Mr Mercer also requested that there be more cycle lanes near schools and railings to attach cycles to. He asked whether council employees deemed to be "essential car users" have been encouraged to use cycles instead. In discussion it was noted that some essential car users may need to get somewhere very quickly, for example, in a child protection matter, where cycling would not be appropriate. In response to comments about the potential cost of being trained to use a bicycle on the roads safely, Councillor Wilkinson pointed out that it is possible to attend a course on this for free. Councillor Southgate said that the Civic Centre is considering the installation of cycle racks in its own car park. This recognises the need to provide facilities for cyclists but money can be an issue. The Chairman then ended the meeting.

