

Hampstead Garden Suburb Residents Association Interim Strategy Report November 2010

This report was prepared by a working party comprising:

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The working party has met 5 times

Sources

We invited contributions by:

email to the HGSLIST

email to a limited number of members of the RA (see below)

letters to local newspapers; and

an article in Suburb News

Feedback was disappointing, such consensus as there was is reflected in the report. Some individuals reiterated well known positions and those positions have also been taken into account, especially where they are consistent with the view of others, including the Working Group.

Introduction

- The issues to be addressed in any fundamental assessment of the role of the RA include:
- what we do;
- how we related to stakeholders;
- , what members and other residents want;
- and communications/publicity.

This report concentrates on communications and publicity. Until those issues are addressed it will impossible to deal with the more fundamental long – term matters; the good work of the RA is not publicised, its contribution to the life of the Suburb is not understood, and we believe this contributes to the apathy towards the RA. Furthermore, we cannot move forward with other matters and efficiently exchange

ideas with members about what they want from the RA until this fundamental is addressed.

The matters for later consideration are set out at the end of this paper, and the appendix summarises our thinking on (a) some of the matters included in this paper and (b) some of those for further consideration.

Communications/Publicity

While the Working Party acknowledge that concentrating too much on electronic communications risks disenfranchising members and other residents who do not have internet access, it is now the most effective means of communicating regularly to members. We do not however suggest that current non-electronic communications are abandoned (and in some cases they may have to be stepped up), but our inability to communicate effectively electronically is a major obstacle to moving forward. The two key elements are emails and website.

Emails

Currently there is no way to email the whole of the membership. Problems include:

- Members who have not given email addresses;
- The email addresses we currently have are unreliable as they have to be manually transcribed into the RA membership system and changes are usually only received once a year with the membership renewals; and
- The number of invalid addresses prevents it from being used as a distribution list for a mail shot without an unacceptable amount of manual intervention.

These defects should be addressed as a matter of urgency. We understand that this can be done with modest expenditure and we should aim to start this as soon as possible with a view to getting most members on the list by the end of June and for the list to be updated regularly thereafter. Authority should be given to the Treasurer to approve sums up to a designated maximum.

Website

The website is not being used as a means of communication by the Residents Association, and information about the work of committees is hopelessly out of date. Until recently the last update provided by CONSAM was a year old and the information from Roads and Traffic has not changed since 2008. Committees can currently update information via email and from early 2011 they will be able to update their own information directly. However, as well as placing a burden on them, it also assumes that people will visit the site regularly to see what is happening.

Regular emails to members would provide a more reliable means of communication and draw attention to the website. We would need to avoid sending emails out too frequently (monthly would be about right). Most topics could be dealt with by a headline and a link to the relevant page of the website – assuming the latter were kept up to date. This is consistent with the Publications Committee's consideration of an emailed monthly newsletter.

A good example of our failure to communicate effectively is the question of street lighting. CONSAM had done a very valuable job in liaising with the London Borough of Barnet to articulate the concerns of residents, explain the conservation issues, and reach a workable compromise. However, this work was completely invisible to residents who first knew about the new lighting when they saw the new lampposts being erected. Debate about this continued for some time on the hgslis until the Chairman of CONSAM sent out an email to explain the situation at which point the correspondence ended; the details are now on the website and a further email has drawn attention to the site. Under the proposed regime, the monthly email newsletter would have explained that new street lighting was being installed and would have directed members to a page on the website explaining (as had been explained to members) why this was happening, the details of what was going to be done and, crucially, the role of CONSAM/RA in representing residents, and what it had achieved.

The Working Group recommends:

- Changes to the website to enable committees to update information directly and have the information displayed prominently should be expedited and implemented as soon as possible ;
- the Publications Committee should be charged with identifying the resources required to produce a monthly email newsletter to members and to seek the approval of council to implement this; and
- an urgent start is made to request each committee to appoint a specific member to keep its website information up to date. A volunteer is available to help with training.

Conventional consultation methods should continue where appropriate and where the issues concerned justify the cost. Public meetings on matters of such importance should be held in such circumstances. They would be publicised on the website, by email, as well as Suburb News and posters in the usual way. In some cases individual notices should be sent to members. The March 2009 meeting organised by the RA at Henrietta Barnett School is a good example, although it was about a year too late.

What we do

The most important work is done by the Committees. CONSAM's work is probably the most important, but it is not well understood by residents who often confuse the RA with the Trust, particularly in the area covered by CONSAM.

Other committees do important work which is almost invisible – Allotments and Trees/Open Spaces being good examples among many.

Roads and Traffic's unsatisfactory situation is too well known to need repeating here. It can be argued that the abandonment, or perhaps postponement of Barnet's plans to extend the CPZ has meant that there has been little for this committee to do. However, there are other roads and traffic issues which should be addressed by the committee: speeding and the recent issue of the Henrietta Barnett school buses come to mind. This is not a committee that should come out of abeyance when the need arises. The development of a working relationship with the London Borough of Barnet should be cultivated by this committee so that when an important issue arises we do not have to work up a relationship from scratch.

Relationships

The RA's relationship with the Trust and the London Borough of Barnet need to be reviewed and strengthened.

The Trust.

CONSAM provides our most regular and important contact with The Trust. It does good work, some of which goes unnoticed. However there are matters not covered by CONSAM or the other committees (including the long term strategy of The Trust itself, in relation to which a more regular dialogue should be instituted both with the Chief Executive and Trustees. It is acknowledged that the RA chairman meets with representatives of the Trust but the feedback from those meetings is sporadic.

It is acknowledged that there is a tension in the relationship in that in representing members it will sometimes be necessary to take a very firm position in opposition to the views of the Trust; on the other hand there are many issues on which our interests are perfectly aligned and we need to make sure that we take every opportunity to work together when there is no conflict of interest. This can only be done if we communicate regularly to review the plans of both organisations and the plans of third parties (particularly those of the London Borough of Barnet) to see where we can work together, and indeed where we differ. We therefore see the need for two levels of engagement with the Trust:

- High level regular exchange on views and plans; and
- Committees to develop a relationship with the relevant members of Trust staff, with the approval of the Trust Chair, or management.

On the first of these points, it would be to the Trust's advantage to be able to claim RA support on key issues so as to demonstrate that their views represent the community.

London Borough of Barnet

There is some debate as to whether the primary relationships should be with Councillors or Officials. We cannot resolve this on our own, but need to engage with both to establish how we can communicate and work most effectively with them. Irrespective of who we deal with, the current ad hoc arrangements are unsatisfactory. We need to establish which individuals in L B Barnet are to be regarded as the first point of contact for particular committees and for the RA as a whole (through the chairman, or perhaps a small sub-committee of the Council). We have in mind regular dialogue and feedback to the RA Council and perhaps attendance at the RA Council meeting or (probably preferably) smaller more informal meetings from time to time with the L B Barnet Councillors representing the wards comprising HGS.

Matters Deferred until Progress is made on the Issues Referred to Above

There are structural and other matters which need to be addressed. We have concluded that while they are important, the RA cannot do everything at once and we need to prioritise. Some of the matters have to be deferred as they require consultation which we are not in a position to carry out efficiently at present. These matters include:

Involvement of younger residents in the RA.

The relationship between the RA Council and Executive and the roles of each.

Rejuvenation of the RA, the Council and the Executive, aided by the Compulsory retirement of council members as presently envisaged by Standing Orders in relation to the Executive Committee, although this shouldn't preclude appropriate co-options to provide continuity or to take advantage of the experience of individuals.

Whether the RA should be organising more social events, and how otherwise it can contribute to the spirit of the Surbub.

Appendix

- The RA needs to look at its structure to see how it can become more 'fit for purpose' to meet modern challenges and ways of communication. It has, over the last 10 years failed, or appeared to have failed the Community on some major issues, to the Suburb's long term detriment, undermining confidence of many people in what is otherwise an excellent service to the Residents.
- Its method of engaging people and operating, through long Executive and Council Meetings which has remained largely unchanged for over 40 years, with large procedural content, needs to be restructured to be more efficient in form and content.
- The RA needs to have clear policies and strategies on major issues which need to be set out – its Objects are clear but there is a lack of detail.
- In a fast changing world with instant communication the RA needs to be able to respond and communicate more effectively.
- It needs to reach out to the Community by engaging people perhaps through an Education programme that involves young and old alike.
- It could set up focus groups, drawing on local residents' expertise on the subjects of Environmental issues and Architecture and Planning building up research and information resources and using these to influence the way we manage our built environment which is under constant pressure for change – of a positive and negative nature.
- It should clearly set out its relationship and roles with regards to other local organisations such as the Trust, the Local Authority in its many forms, Government Departments in so much as their activities affect the Suburb and other bodies.
- It should revise and apply rigour to its spending/giving strategies to ensure that they give real value to members.
- It should consider replacing 'charity giving' with the funding of professional assistance to help implement its progressive strategy and its strategy of engagement