

**LOSRA AGM 2014**  
**Chairman's Report**

As you are probably aware, I am giving this report in my capacity as Acting Chairman as well as President of LOSRA, as a result of some developments in the middle of our operating year, which I will explain in a bit more detail in the course of the report. As a result, this is more of a general report on the year, rather than necessarily a Chairman's eye view of it, at least as far as the first part of the year is concerned.

After last year's AGM, there was still some unfinished business in relation to issues which had more or less, but not quite, been concluded, or where we needed to see how plans came to fruition. The Police College development got under way, as did that for the Environment Agency site, and the London Irish development of the Hazelwood site also got started, maybe a bit quicker than some people thought it would. As a result there were more to-ings and fro-ings over the final Crest Nicholson plan for the London Irish site in The Avenue. We found ourselves in the invidious position of having to give an opinion on which of two basically unacceptable plans we, in inverted commas, preferred.

The Surrey Herald made it worse by inaccurately reporting that LOSRA "supported" one of the plans, when of course all we did was take a view of which of the plans on the table, in a context where a development was already 100% certain to happen, was the least unacceptable. We have to do these things, but it doesn't give us any pleasure. We found ourselves obliged to write a letter to the Herald putting the record straight.

The working of Watersplash Farm on the Sunbury and Shepperton borders for gravel has come a bit closer during the year. Cemex have been refining their plans, and have taken on board a lot of the points raised by Nick Hutchings of SSAGE – Sunbury & Shepperton Against Gravel Extraction – and myself, and hopefully when work finally gets under way the impact on local people will be minimised. There have been people who have come late to this matter and are complaining that LOSRA failed to effectively oppose it, which is a bit rich seeing as how we were trying to drum up interest from local people eight or nine years ago when this first came up – we did what we could and succeeded in getting Vicarage Farm permanently removed from the list of sites to be worked, but when Watersplash Farm inevitably rose to the top of the list, the best we could do was to engage with Cemex and get the best deal we could, and I think that's what we've done.

Another issue that was ongoing at last year's AGM was the proposal for a hydro-power plant on the backwater at Sunbury. A planning application was submitted in August last year, which we opposed because the evidence appeared to indicate that there would be an unacceptable environmental impact. In the event Elmbridge Borough Council invalidated the application for technical reasons and it has not re-surfaced. We don't know if the issue is dead or not – we suspect the appetite for disproportionate government subsidies for this kind of scheme may be waning in Whitehall.

The long-running, and really quite extraordinary saga of the Charlton Lane ludicrously named EcoPark, has continued throughout the year. The machinations are so complex that

they are impossible to recount here – it may be that if there are specific questions, our in-house technical expert on the Committee Peter Francis can file them in the Open Forum later on. Suffice to say that Surrey County Council's conduct in the matter has been such that it has prompted two articles in Private Eye magazine, one of them in their Rotten Boroughs column highlighting the questionable nature of their handling of the matter. Peter, along with his diligent colleagues on SATEP, Shepperton Against The EcoPark, has continued to spend long hours researching the technical background to developments, continuing to lobby Surrey, the Environment Agency, the Health & Safety Executive and the government departments to highlight key issues, as well as attending the public inquiries during the year into the re-location of the footpath to present our case, and the Surrey planning committee which considered the revised plan.

The revised plan was necessary because the supplier of the original unproven technology went out of business, and Surrey and SITA had to find a replacement. The only thing they could find was an incinerator, which they have tried to present as a gasifier, which it patently isn't. As a result a new planning permission should have been required, but they presented it as a set of minor modifications. Given the history, there was no way that Surrey's Planning Committee was going to turn it down and it was passed. The matter is with central government to rule on whether the technology is what the Council say it is or not – the evidence is perfectly clear, but don't be surprised if the decision reflects the political background rather than the science. This is really one of the most appalling litanies of thoroughly bad local government I have ever witnessed, and sadly I for one honestly don't feel that I can trust Surrey County Council to represent the best interests of this part of the county in an objective and even-handed manner.

Soon after last year's AGM, we were advised that Cala Homes were intending to put in a planning application to build houses on the old tennis courts site adjacent to St. Paul's School in The Ridings. This is land owned by the Order of Nuns who own the land on which the school is located. The plans went through several incarnations while discussions took place with Cala Homes, and eventually a plan for 17 houses, many fewer than previously proposed, was submitted. LOSRA, along with the excellent local action group set up to fight the scheme, vigorously opposed the plan in our submissions, based on some detailed research and cogent argument by the action group, led by our former chairman Alan Doyle, and which received positive mentions at the Planning Committee, which took place a few weeks ago. Based on the Officer's recommendations, the plan was rejected, but not on as many grounds as we believed were available to the council, most notably the land's status as Protected Urban Open Space. We can presumably expect a revised plan, which may or may not address some of the issues which we and the action group raised in our submissions.

Another issue where the community found itself dealing with Surrey County Council trying to tell us that black was white was over the future plans for the Fire Service in Spelthorne. A so-called consultation took place to consider plans to replace the two fire stations in Spelthorne with one, with inevitably a reduced number of appliances. This, we were told, would not involve a significant or problematic reduction in the quality of service, the level of coverage and the response times, and that they were no negative safety implications. A simple spreadsheet readily proved that this was nonsense, but of course, that doesn't bother

the great and good - and that was very much in inverted commas – of local government, and once again everyone was forced into that same invidious choice mentioned earlier – having to choose between two unacceptable options, so we got one station but with what amounts to one and a half appliances.

But of course, the big issue that emerged, actually before last year's AGM at around the time of our Garden Party in June, was what at the time we regarded as the unthinkable prospect of housing development on one of the most important and substantial areas of Green Belt in the Borough – Kempton Park. Once again, the saga is too long to recount in detail, but our Chairman and other committee members met representatives of The Jockey Club, Kempton Park, their consultants and Spelthorne Council officers to discuss this. It seemed that the project had been under consideration for a while, and that the Council viewed it, at the very least, on the positive side of being completely neutral – that was certainly the tenor of how they pitched it to us. It was seen, we were given to understand, as a way of dealing with their shortfall on affordable housing (the result of the planning permissions they had allowed over several years) in one fell swoop.

In our autumn newsletter, which I wrote, but which was agreed by the chairman and other senior committee members, we reported this under the headline "Spelthorne plans major housing development on Kempton Park". As you may know, the proverbial hit the fan, and a LOSRA deputation was summoned to Knowle Green, where our Chairman had to suffer a verbal onslaught from both elected members and officers of Spelthorne Council. Their stance was that the article implied that Spelthorne were in some way involved in preparing or submitting a planning application, which was clearly, on a basic reading of the piece, not what it said or remotely implied.

We stuck to our guns, made it clear that we believed the article was entirely justified by what we had been told and the way it had been pitched, and declined to apologise. One senior member even went so far as to threaten legal action, on what grounds was not clear. We agreed to give Spelthorne the opportunity to write a response which we posted on our web site, and also included in full in our Spring newsletter so that every Sunbury resident could read it. We were surprised that the response was quite anodyne, in that it simply said that Spelthorne had not had discussions about any plan for development on the site, and could not form an opinion on anything until a planning application had been submitted, and that there would be a full consultation if a plan were submitted. Their piece made no attempt to say why they thought the article was inaccurate and misleading, which is what our officers were forcefully told at the meeting with them.

At the turn of the year, Alan Doyle, our new Chairman elected at last year's AGM resigned for personal reasons. Quite simply, he felt that LOSRA's necessary approach of playing a restrained political straight bat with officers and elected members in local government was not something he felt comfortable with, and he didn't think it would be good for LOSRA for him to continue – it was a decision we respected and understood, and we were very grateful to Alan for giving it a go and for absorbing the unfair flak that he did. As a result, it was decided that rather than try to identify a new Chairman halfway through the year, I would, as

President and former Chairman, take over in an acting capacity in a caretaker administration until this AGM.

Alan, as you may know, has since set up a website and action group called Keep Kempton Green, and regularly publishes in their e-mail newsletters documents relating to Spelthorne Council's actions and correspondence over Kempton Park which have been placed in the public domain as result of his Freedom Of Information requests. There have been some interesting and eye-opening revelations in these documents, which in our view only serve to underline the accuracy of our article in our autumn newsletter. I would emphasise that Keep Kempton Green is not part of LOSRA, but in the time-honoured tradition of action groups like Hazelwood Action Group, Green Street Action Group, Campaign Against Riverside Over Development, Sunbury Opposes London Irish Development and the Police College Action Group, the existence of an independent campaigning group which can focus on a vital issue alongside LOSRA's broader strategic thrust is hugely valuable and effective and I commend Alan for his assiduous attention to detail and tireless work in exposing the background to this issue.

While all that was going on the community was dealing with a very different problem - that of the extraordinary weather events and widespread flooding. LOSRA is not physically equipped to do much that is practical in such circumstances, but we did our best to use our website and e-bulletins to disseminate the information that was coming from the Council and other agencies, but at times one felt slightly helpless as many local families were suffering great difficulties. We were therefore very happy to help when an enterprising group of local people got together to organise flood volunteers, and we both publicised and chaired a public meeting at St Mary's Hall to facilitate the organisation of the group and co-ordinate it with the Council and other agencies. There has been considerable fall-out on what happened during the floods at recent local meetings, and tonight we are grateful to have David Murphy from the Environment Agency here to look at the future plans for flood management.

On a rather different environmental question, LOSRA has tried to promote a proper public debate and consultation about the issue of cattle grazing in Sunbury Park. There has been a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding on this subject, mainly as a result of Spelthorne Council's failure to do what they promised, and have an exhibition and familiarisation weekend in the Park, where Park users – and their dogs – can meet the cattle and understand exactly what the project might entail. A local action group engaged with the Council on this, and the outcome has been that a pilot project is intended to be implemented, if time allows, in the early autumn to see how the management policy works in practice. There are certainly potential issues, but there are also significant potential upsides, so we have to wait and see.

While all this negative and frustrating stuff has been going on as we try to maintain the quality of life in Lower Sunbury against people with other agendas, we've been trying to do some positive stuff as well. Committee member Paul Thompson has got involved in the issues at Sunbury Health Centre. We carried out a web site survey to find out what problems residents encountered – the appointments system inevitably was the primary one – and Paul has promoted the idea of a Patients Participation Group which now has regular meetings with the Practice Manager and Office/Reception Manager to address problems and

shortcomings and get them dealt with. The real problem of course is space, exacerbated by the fact that half the space is given over to Virgin Healthcare to whom certain services have been contracted out, although they don't use that space all the time, which could readily be used by doctors to see patients. You didn't know about Virgin's involvement? No, neither did we. Anyway, it's a long haul but we're very much on the case.

Another Committee member George Rushbrook has been pursuing another *bête noire* of ours, which is that of air pollution, especially at the known hot spots of Sunbury Cross and Green Street, which are among the worst locations in Surrey. What emerged was staggering – the permanent monitoring station at Sunbury Cross was removed two or three years ago without anyone being told as a cost-saving exercise. The whole budget for it was £7,500. So now Spelthorne is quite happy that it doesn't have a problem with air pollution at Sunbury Cross because it doesn't record the data in such detail anymore. We are rattling round the corridors of power to get the monitoring re-instated – sometimes you don't know whether to laugh or cry when dealing with those who presume to know better than we do.

On another positive note our immediate past Chairman John Hirsh has been pursuing a project which hopefully demonstrates that LOSRA's priorities and energies are not simply directed at stopping things happening but also promoting good things happening. Encouraged by a positive response to a survey and a show of hands at last year's AGM, John has been moving ahead with a project aimed at getting a pedestrian and cycle footbridge across the Thames from Sunbury to the Thames Path. To that end, LOSRA made a detailed submission to the Surrey Cycling Strategy consultation, and John has been working with Surrey officers and specialist consultants to get a feasibility study done, and is in the process of raising funds to enable that to be done. He is hopeful of reaching the target in the foreseeable future so that the study can get under way. We hope it's one example at least of LOSRA taking a positive initiative rather than simply fire-fighting in the face of the incessant pressure on the local environment and infrastructure.

So that's the report. If it sounds like I am angry and disillusioned after six months back in the Chairman's seat you wouldn't be far wrong. I have rarely experienced a period like the last few years where political ideology has so skewed the planning environment that the whole planning process seems to have been brought into disrepute, and a combination of developers, big business, council officers and elected representatives appear to feel that they can do what they like and simply ignore the ordinary people – the “hard-working families” – more inverted commas - that politicians of all persuasions love to claim as their natural supporters – and worse, some of them appear to take a perverse satisfaction in putting one over on anyone that stands up to the vested interests. I've been doing this stuff for 35 years and have met a lot of people in local government and other organisations and companies who I might not have agreed with but have been able to respect and get along with. Right now there are plenty out there who are trying that goodwill to the absolute limit. I don't think life is going to get any easier, but we have to hope that in the future our relationship with local government will take on a more constructive, inclusive and consensual direction.