

March 2024

WERS AGM CLLR REPORT – Liz Frost

2023 was a busy, but very interesting year.

In February last year, just before our AGM, our interim Chief Executive, was appointed to the permanent position.

Another appointment was of our new Monitoring Officer and Head of Legal. We had been seeing whether the two parts should be split, and sharing roles with a neighbouring borough. But we concluded that we needed our own MO and Head of Legal, based in Epsom.

The Borough wanted a lasting memorial to the pandemic, and so memorial benches have been installed in each Ward. We have 2 in this Ward. One is on the Woodcote Millennium Green, behind the Hospital – a fitting place since the hospital played such a major role during the pandemic. The other is a rustic bench on the Downs. As Councillors, we were involved in placing ribbons on the benches on Covid Memorial day earlier this month

I was very pleased to be selected as one of the WERS candidates to stand for the RA in Woodcote and Langley Vale Ward at the May elections. There was much hard work planning the literature and the campaign – then of course the delivering and door knocking etc. Thank you to the WERS Committee and all the others who helped both in advance and on the day itself – and to all those who voted for us. We were really pleased that Woodcote and Langley Vale returned all 3 RA candidates – and that the Council again has an RA majority. It is a privilege to be able to continue to work for you.

Following the elections, as Councillors, we decide committee membership for this civic year.

I remained as chair of the Standards & Constitution Committee. There were major revisions to our Constitution that came into force last May, but the working group set up the previous year had not had time to complete all of the review, and so we re-convened a Constitution working group and have been carrying on with the outstanding work and working through other issues that come to light when a new document like this comes into everyday use. Revisions and updates will be an ongoing task, there are forever legislative changes that mean elements need to be revised or revisited, but now the major work has been completed, it should be less onerous each year.

A major change for me is that I am now the vice chair of the Environment Committee. Not having been on that committee for a few years, it was a very steep learning curve! It is a very interesting committee with a wide remit and some definite challenges. To highlight a couple - Climate Change.

The borough has a Climate Action Plan, and we are aiming for the Council's operations to be carbon neutral by 2035. Working towards that, this past year has seen -

Completion of work to install LED lighting in all Council buildings,

Solar Panels on the Playhouse roof, and investigation of other potential sites.

Electric vehicle charging points in council-run car parks.

The boiler system at the Longmead Centre has been replaced by a more energy-efficient one.

One of the borough's greatest Climate Change challenges is our fleet vehicles. We have replaced a couple of smaller vehicles with electric version, e.g. a staff pool car and the vehicles for meals on wheels – but it will be a while before we can address our waste collection vehicles. Not only are they on long-term lease, but there are really not any suitable alternatives at present – and the Government is in the process of making a lot of changes to waste collection requirements, so we are awaiting these to find out what we will need.

We work closely with SCC and the other Surrey boroughs and districts on climate change issues.

E.g., there's a Surrey-wide waste and re-cycling partnership where we look at issues and strategies for reducing waste and increasing re-cycling, as well as how to address de-carbonising the waste fleets.

We also took part in the Surrey 'Solar Together' group buying scheme that encouraged residents to install solar panels using suppliers, installers and contracts had been vetted.

Trees

Another aspect of the work looks at trees on Borough land. A major problem at the moment is Ash Die-back. It is estimated that we have 6k ash trees on Council owned or managed land. It's likely that 90% of them will become affected, and over time could lose branches or die and fall. Obviously a safety risk, so the Council has a program for inspecting the trees and felling where necessary. Priority is areas of greatest risk to the public, for example near schools, roads and footpaths. We do also have a tree planting strategy and are encouraging more tree planting on suitable Council land, not just to replace the ashes lost, but to increase trees overall to improve the environment.

Allotments

The council managed Allotments also come under the remit of Environment Committee. Following council staff re-structuring a few years ago, there has been a lack of dedicated officer time to manage the Allotments service, which was becoming a problem. But, following the formation of a working group to identify the key issues and resources needed, concerns were raised at a senior level, and we are starting to see progress. We held a meeting with site reps recently, and plot holders reported noticing improvements. Long may the progress continue.

In addition to the committee work, I've continued to represent residents at key Planning Committee meetings and to discuss applications with officers where there appear to be problems; and to report things that need to be done to the borough or county (as appropriate) – or the County Councillor – and respond to residents' questions on a variety of topics.

As I said, a busy year – and I look forward to continuing the work during the next one.