

Vanburgh Park Estate Residents Association: All Residents' Meeting and AGM 16/05/23
Held at Mycenae House.

Present:

Committee:

Alex Wheeler
Mick Cooke
Laura Cade
Will Egan
Alberte Lauridsen
Virginia Clements
Lisa Turner
Billy Taggart
Abdi Barre

Residents:

Duncan Brown
Clare Barry
Doug Henderson
Beth Higham-Edwards
Darren James
Karen James
Jess Sampson
Emma
Sophie Hatcher
Harry Miller
Roger Irwin
Cherry Irwin
Joe Dennet
Richard Potter
S Sheppard
Ed Gudden
Katherine Taylor
James Taylor
Imelda Cavanagh
Peter Milne
Yuki Nishimura
Michael Gallagher
Christoph Hadrys
Ben George
Alexandra Braun-Woodbury
Adrian Joyce
Laura Lewis-Davies
Stephen Davies
Matilda Agace

Royal Borough of Greenwich:

Pat Slattery: Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Homelessness

Richard Parkin: Senior Assistant Director of Repairs and Investment.

Taric Ahmed

Barbara Thorpe: Community Participation & Diversity Officer, Community Participation, Directorate of Housing and Safer Communities.

Christine St Matthew Daniel: Councillor Blackheath Westcombe ward

Steven Reed

Paul Womack

Introductions and Apologies:

No Apologies were received.

The Chair invited RBG representatives to introduce themselves.

It was agreed that the AGM business of the meeting would be dealt with at the end of the meeting in order to allow Royal Borough of Greenwich (RBG) representatives to leave when the part of the agenda which needed their participation had been concluded.

Alex Wheeler (Chair) invited Pat Slattery to speak to the meeting regarding the issue of plants on the balconies of the mews flats on the Vanbrugh Park Estate (VPE).

PS apologised for the way in which the council had approached the issue and the resulting polarisation and said that there were concerns around safety in the event of an emergency i.e. whether the plants would block access to the flats but acknowledged that there were wider considerations around the general well-being of residents and poor communication from the council.

Harry Miller (resident) and Roger Irwin both raised extensive concerns around these issues.

Paul Womack (RBG) spoke about the issue from his point-of-view as a fire safety expert. He maintained that any items at all on the balconies constituted a significant hazard and that they should be removed and that the letter demanding this sent to residents had been signed off by RBG. RBG had a legal duty to residents and a policy of zero tolerance in matters affecting residents' safety. Many of the residents objected to this interpretation including Michael Gallagher who pointed out that it was only the residents in the mews flats on Combe Avenue who had been issued with repeated letters despite other flats on the estate also having plants etc. on balconies. PW attributed this to the fact that the borough was tackling the issue in 'phases' – MG and others said that if the fire-risk was deemed to be serious for flats in Combe Avenue and Combe Mews it should be equally serious for all of them.

Richard Parkin spoke saying that RBG had a legal duty to carry out fire risk assessments executed by fire risk assessors and that the action to clear balconies dated back to 2020.

Peter Milne (resident) said that there were matters of far greater concern in terms of Health & Safety such as dangerous wiring in the garages which had had a temporary fix applied that has been left in place for 10 years.

RP reiterated that RBG had a policy of zero tolerance to risk.

MG raised the fact that he had emailed RBG regarding the closure of the stairs on 12/04/23 and had received no response and that they were still closed 35 days later – this being a greater risk to residents than potted plants.

Doug Harrison (resident) asked for a balanced approach to the matter. He pointed out that during periods of extreme temperatures such as those experienced in summer 2022 the heat had shattered windows and melted asphalt on the Combe Avenue balcony and that plants went some way to mitigating these issues. He proposed that the plants be allowed to remain with a mutually agreed width of walkway for access.

PW – agreed to visit the estate to review all fire related issues with a small group of residents.

Beth Higham-Edwards (resident) regretted the lack of flexibility demonstrated by the council. She cited Camden Council as an example of a local authority which employed a more flexible approach e.g. pots were allowed as long as they weren't plastic ones which are a greater fire hazard.

Roger Irwin pointed out that residents in Westcombe Court had not been consulted with on this matter and were also under threat of having their plants removed.

HM asked that a vote be taken on a motion that he had put before the meeting condemning the council's action. The motion was put and overwhelming agreed to.

DH asked that there be a commitment to open dialogue between RBG and estate residents over access requirements being in compliance with building and safety regulations.

Laura Cade (Committee Member) asked that RP look at the other H&S issues on the agenda and he listened to residents as they spoke about many of them. It was repeatedly pointed out that the on-paper commitment to zero tolerance around H&S was in stark contrast to the reality on the ground.

Christine St Mathews-Daniel said that following her walk around inspection last year many issues had been dealt with.

RP said that RBG is undergoing an improvement programme in its repair service. The backlog of repairs has been reduced from 5 years to 18 months but he acknowledged there was more to do.

A programme for external repairs and maintenance was currently out to tender with £500m available across the borough. RP could not give guarantees that VPE would benefit as RBG would need £1billion to tackle all issues across the borough's housing stock.

Lisa Turner (resident) asked about specific consultation meetings for residents of Westcombe Court, a meeting had been promised in April but had not taken place. This meeting has been scheduled for 30/05/23 at Mycenae House but residents had not been informed of this by RBG officers – PS assured LT that this would be actioned ASAP. LT said that leaseholders had been billed for the refurbishment with no communication about what is actually going to happen and when. Taric Ahmed (RBG) committed to improved communication with Westcombe Court residents.

It was agreed that this meeting represented a complete reset in communication and action between RBG and VPE residents. RP committed to a site meeting within 10 days. (This commitment was confirmed by PS via email on 17/05/23.)

5G Mast

Residents expressed their frustration with having to react to applications to site 5G masts on the estate – currently on the third application within 12 months. RP said RBG had no control over such applications but promised to speak to his colleague Simon Morris at RBG. Christoph Hadrys (resident) said that much smaller and quieter solutions were possible and that masts such as those proposed were a cost cutting measure by the phone companies.

Service Charges

BH-E raised concerns over inaccurate and high service charges that were inconsistent between neighbours and with charges for lift maintenance being levied on residents with no lifts. TA committed to looking into this and explaining what was going on.

Councillor Surgeries

CSTM-D – informed residents about Ward Councillor Surgeries which take place on the first Saturday of every month from 10-11.00 at Mycenae House and from 13.00 -14.00 at Age Concern in Blackheath Village.

This ended the business of the meeting involving RBG and representatives of RBG left the meeting. They were thanked for their attendance and commitment to addressing the issues raised by residents.

RBG's Housing Services Outreach Work

Barbara Thorpe (RBG) encouraged all council tenants and leaseholders to consider becoming a Housing Champion and spoke about the YourVIEW scheme. RBG is keen to attract residents from all demographics who can help them shape and improve RBG's housing services. This is a virtual panel of council tenants and leaseholders which residents can join or leave at any time after signing up. More information available at: www.royalgreenwich.gov.uk/yourview

AGM general business

Financial report: Presented by Virginia Clements (Treasurer) funds are slightly down and fund-raising ideas were asked for. The report can be found on the estate website <https://vanbrughparkestate.com/>

Greening Committee/Gardening Club

Current progress was discussed and Alberte Lauridsen (Committee Member and member of the greening group) informed the meeting that more improvements were being discussed and that as residents are doing much of the work themselves the budget is being used as effectively as possible. It was felt that a broader consultation with residents around greening improvements will be useful as there is a high level of interest – Gardening group will aim to set this up.

Social Events:

AW (Chair) reported on past and future social events.

Summer Party 1/07/23

Emily Wilding Davison memorial/celebration – AL plans to gather more ideas and tell residents more about the project at the summer party.

The committee formally resigned and residents were asked to propose and second people to be committee members. All those currently on the committee wished to remain in office and were duly elected. Lisa Turner and Billy Taggart previously co-opted members were formally elected as were Clare Barry and Michael Gallagher as new members.

Future Meeting dates.

All Residents: 19/09/23 Mycenae House.

VPRE committee – 18/06/23 86 Combe Avenue.

The meeting closed at 9.45pm.