

Standish Voice Chair Person's Annual Report 2016-2017 by Gill Foster

This is the third annual report for Standish Neighbourhood Forum – Standish Voice, and I am pleased to report we are continuing to go from strength to strength as our profile and membership has continued to grow in the village.

2016/2017 has been an extremely busy and exciting year for Standish Voice, culminating in the development and publication of our draft Standish Neighbourhood Plan.

As in previous years the 15 committee members, who have been elected to office and voluntarily given their time, have each taken on responsibility for specific areas of expertise and have played a crucial role in the work of Standish Voice and the development of the draft Neighbourhood plan. Their contribution, dedication and hard work has been fantastic and I would personally like to thank all the committee members for all their hard work and perseverance over the last year, and for the amount of time they have each devoted to getting us to the stage we are at with the Standish Neighbourhood Plan. In addition we have had a number of specialist working groups and they have worked on specific projects. I would like also to thank all those people on the working groups for their time and contribution.

We have also been continuing to forge relationships with Wigan Council and held several meetings with the Chief Executive, deputy Leader of the Council (Cllr Molyneaux) and senior managers. As we are the first Neighbourhood Forum in the borough, Wigan Council has continued to be very supportive and helpful in providing us with the information we have required for the development of the Neighbourhood Plan. It has been a steep learning curve for us all.

We have had two dedicated planning officers, Jennie Hill and Kathy Bibby, and also additional assistance from Nick Clarke and David Kearsley to help co-ordinate and give advice to us on technical planning policy issues. Myself and Paul have met with the officers on a monthly basis to discuss technical issues relating to the draft Neighbourhood Plan. I would particularly like to thank all the officers at the council who have been assisting us.

We have continued to receive support from Locality, and during the last year we have been successful in receiving further grant funding. This has allowed us to have technical support from specialist consultants – Aecom, who you may recall undertook a housing technical study and Housing Needs Assessment specifically for Standish, and have more recently undertaken Masterplanning work for the village centre. This work was completed and all these reports have been signed off by central government and Locality and have been used as evidence in the development of the draft neighbourhood plan.

We have also received grant funding to allow us to use consultancy support for the development of the plan. We have been really pleased to be able to re-engage Carol Latham to help us with the writing of the draft Neighbourhood Plan and to facilitate training workshops for us. Carol works with a number of neighbourhood forums across the country and her knowledge and expertise has been invaluable. I am sure the committee will join me in thanking her for her input and working with us.

In addition the funding also enabled us to engage Jo Widdecombe, a planning consultant and expert on neighbourhood planning, who has worked with Planning Aid and given us independent advice on the draft policies in the Neighbourhood Plan. Again, on behalf of the committee, we would like to thank Jo for her input and invaluable advice.

In addition to the Locality funding we have been successful in obtaining funds from Wigan and Leigh Homes which helped us to put on the very successful Christmas Market on the 3rd of December 2016. I would like to thank all the people who organised and volunteered on the day and we all look forward to another successful event on 02 December this year. We would not have been able to do as much without external funding but we are aware that we will need to raise money ourselves. There have been several fundraising events and I would like to thank all those people who have organised these events to support Standish Voice.

We have continued to respond to planning applications for housing developments in Standish and have also made comment on a number of technical consultation documents over the past year. In particular I would like to thank Allan Foster, Nicky Ogden and Brian Jones for their work on these.

In May I attended the planning appeal for the HIMOR site on Rectory Lane and gave evidence against this development. Unfortunately the planning Inspector over-ruled the Council's decision to refuse further housing in Standish, and this makes it even more important that the draft Neighbourhood Plan is accepted by the village.

We have continued to actively raise the profile of the neighbourhood forum, locally, regionally and nationally though a series of press releases, use of social media, meetings and discussions with national bodies. Paul Ogden, Vice-chairman, has undertaken the role of communications officer since we were established and has been responsible for producing the newsletter and keeping the website and face book page up to date with the latest information on the work of Standish Voice and other local issues. I am sure you will all agree he has done a wonderful job. I would personally like to thank him for his valuable time, hard work and his passion for Standish Voice, which has not wavered. I feel sure that all the committee members would like to join me in thanking him.

The production of a Neighbourhood Plan has to follow a strict legal process and the committee have undertaken several training workshops to ensure we understand and follow that process. Consultation is a key component of the production of the plan and this started with the questionnaire in summer 2015, the results of which were used to identify the issues, themes, vision and objectives within the plan. These have been widely consulted upon and consultation on the future use of the Rec was also consulted upon in March this year to inform this policy. The draft Neighbourhood Plan was finalised in late summer and enabled the six week statutory Regulation 14 consultation to be undertaken on the draft policies, which concluded on 10th November 2017.

We have received a number of responses (210) to this consultation and these responses are being collated, they will be considered and any changes required will be made. The final draft plan will be issued and submitted to Wigan Council as soon as possible. Wigan will then undertake their consultation before arranging for the planning examination and eventual referendum by the village to accept the plan. There is still a long way to go but I am sure, having seen the plan, that you can appreciate the amount of time and effort that the committee members have put into producing the draft plan on behalf of the people in our village.

This year has not been without challenges and it is with regret that the committee has had to rescind the membership of three people. In addition it has been necessary to introduce a code of conduct for people attending the Standish Voice monthly meetings due to a few people whose egregious behaviour was disruptive and disrespectful. It saddens me to report that some committee members have been subjected to verbal and written abuse. We are all volunteers and it is a great pity that a handful of people have felt the need to act in this disgraceful way. I would personally like to commend the committee members for their dignified behaviour, commitment, dedication and passion for Standish which has shone through during those difficult times.

So what will the next twelve months hold?

As a committee we are fully aware of the enormous amount of hard work we still need to undertake before the Standish Neighbourhood Plan is adopted. As mentioned earlier, we will need to collate all the responses to the statutory Regulation 14 consultation on the draft Neighbourhood Plan and make any amendments to the draft plan if required. The plan will come to an EGM of the Forum for approval to send to the Council. We will need to finalise all the evidence and statutory documentation that has to be submitted and accompany the draft Neighbourhood Plan, and we will have to continue to work with Wigan as the next phases of the statutory process progress. Undoubtedly the biggest challenge will be the examination stage of the neighbourhood plan, but with the expertise of all the current committee members I am confident that we can professionally justify the plan to the Inspector.

If the plan is adopted at the Referendum, then more hard work is required to implement many of the proposals to improve our village. Nobody should underestimate the time, enthusiasm and commitment that will be required until 2030.

In addition to the work on the Neighbourhood Plan, we will continue to hold events and encourage people in the village to support the work of Standish Voice.

Special thanks, as I mentioned earlier, to Paul as Vice-chairperson, to Karen Bliss as treasurer, Ron Wade as membership secretary, Nic Macmillan for her phenomenal work on analysis of relevant policies and collation of the evidence base, to Janet Monks and Dave King for their work on environmental issues, Sarah Djali for liaison with the schools and proof reading the draft plan, Fran Aiken for her work on health and linkages with Standish Library, Brian Jones for his work on local transport, Diane Gore for her work with local businesses, Nicky Ogden and Allan Foster for their expertise and work on housing, and Jaime Jones for her tireless work on the Christmas market.

It has been a privilege to work with such a diverse, dedicated and committed group of people.

In this report I have concentrated on the formal work of Standish Voice committee, which is the production of the Standish Neighbourhood Plan, and this is the first non-business neighbourhood plan to be produced in Greater Manchester and Standish should be very proud of this. However there has been a considerable amount of other work which has been undertaken which Paul Ogden – Vice chair, will report on next.

As Chairperson, I am extremely proud of everything that the committee members have achieved so far on behalf of the village, and I hope that in the coming years Standish Voice Neighbourhood Forum continues to go from strength to strength.