



## Friern Barnet & Whetstone Residents' Association

[www.fbwra.org](http://www.fbwra.org) email:fbwra@btinternet.com

### Chairman's Report – 2024

My 2022 Report was 60% longer than that for the preceding year. The first draft of this report was 30% longer still. With careful editing I reduced this to 10%. Proof indeed that the Association and its Officers and Committee have been busy?

### Membership

For each of the last two years I reported the trend of decline in the Association's membership seemed to have halted. This time I can report that membership rose last year – by 3% - not dramatic but faster than the national economy – and with my colleague Tim acting as both Treasurer and Membership Secretary you can trust the figures. Thank you, Tim.

Of course each year we lose some members but others join and what is particularly good news is that last year the number joining was very nearly twice the number joining the year before. A good measure of the credit for this must go to Richard, who held his own recruitment drive amongst his neighbours. Thank you, Richard.

### Communication with members

Our Newsletter and Mailchimp are the two primary means we use to communicate with our members

The Newsletter is the main medium we use. Although as new members join we have seen a gradual move towards requests for the Newsletter to be sent in electronic form, we have no plans to discontinue printed copies. Contributions for the Newsletter come from the Committee members and other sources and sometimes we have absolutely stunning photos to illustrate the articles – Maria has developed a speciality in capturing the natural beauty found in Whetstone and I hope Harry will forgive me for singling out his shot of the scene at the Coppetts Wood Festival last June. Once again I must thank Maria who assembles the basic draft of each issue and deals with our printers- sometimes under considerable time pressure. Thanks are also due to Yvonne who co-ordinates our team of members who make the deliveries – and thanks also to them – think of the postage they save us!

We use the "Mailchimp" bulk email system to send emails to members. This is invaluable when we need to contact them quickly. A while ago we reduced the number of Mailchimps we were sending as the reports showed fewer of them were being opened. I recently analysed what we sent over a 12 month period – 15 messages in all, of which 7 were administrative (Members' Meeting, Summer Splash, etc.). The others included a seasonal greeting, a request for information, 2 information items and 2 each on planning issues and highways consultations.

### Association activities

- **Meetings**

In March we held our first Members' Meeting since the pandemic. Our guests were local councillors representing each of the 4 wards all or part of which lie within the Association's area. I must thank Sachin for skilfully chairing the main part of the meeting, at which probably the most "burning" local issues were covered – including that of potholes. We had hoped to hold another Members' Meeting in the Autumn but in the event were unable to do so.

At last year's AGM, in May, our guest speaker was Councillor and Assembly Member Anne Clarke, who spoke about the fire service and emergency planning.

The Association's other activities have focused on the following -

- **Planning**

A few years ago the core of the planning activity was reviewing planning applications for the area we cover and in some cases making representations about them to the Council. With time that has changed - in 2022 we made representations on about 8 applications and last year on just 1 – the care home proposed for Oakleigh Park South – an application the Council refused earlier this year.

What has changed is that most of the obviously undeveloped land in the area has now been built on and many of the redevelopment opportunities have also been taken up. That means the focus of our planning work has changed. Last year we put a lot of effort into investigating the redevelopment proposals (not planning applications- they are still to come) for the North Finchley Town Centre and the Great North Leisure Park on the High Road. I and other members of the Committee attended presentations, met Councillors and also representatives of Regal London, the prospective developers of both sites. We have covered this at length in successive issues of the Newsletter.

We liaise with the Finchley Society planning group in relation to both North Finchley Town Centre and the Leisure Park, as well as other subjects of mutual interest

- **Highways**

During the year our Highways Sub-Committee (currently this comprises me, Maria and Graham) had two meetings with representatives of the Council's Highways Department, one to discuss highways issues in Friern Barnet and the other for Whetstone. We reported on these and other highways issues in the Newsletter.

An important general point that emerged from one of these meetings was that Councillors have changed the way highways matters are dealt with – more decisions are now made by Council officers rather than by committees of democratically elected Councillors. Whilst this has supposedly speeded matters up it has not necessarily made for better decision making.

An illustration of this is the St John's C of E Primary and Friern Barnet Schools School Street Scheme which we covered in both Mailchimp and the Newsletter.

Additionally, along with other Associations we have been looking in some detail at the arrangement between the Council and JOLT Charge for 120 sets of outdoor advertising signs with EV chargers attached to be built by JOLT on the Borough's pavements. This work is ongoing but raises issues of governance and compliance with highways law.

- **Freedom of Information Act**

We reported in the Newsletter on the difficulties we had in getting information about the Council's "Culture Strategy Steering Group". Unfortunately this is just one example of a wider issue.

There is a problem with getting information from the Council. The problem has been getting worse. Increased delegation of decisions to officers and the Council adopting a "Cabinet" structure which reduces the involvement of other Councillors in decision making has reduced the natural and legitimate flow of hard information from Councillors and Council Committees to the public and to groups such as our Association.

This situation forces us to continue to make considerable use of the Freedom of Information Act to try to get information from the Council. This is a process which for us is time-consuming, slow, and uncertain and, for the Council, it is costly. The legislation allows the Council to withhold information about "work in progress", so using the Act is more use in obtaining information about past decisions than current Council projects. For example, we have been unable to get answers to reasonable questions about the Whetstone bus lane proposals – questions such as "what information is held as to the anticipated loss of on-street parking spaces in each section of the proposed bus lanes?"

Additionally-

- **Summer Splash**

Having returned in 2022, after the pandemic, in 2023 the Summer Splash – our “garden party” for members – was “re-invented”, with both a change of venue and a change in format. The event was relocated to the Church hall and garden of St Mary Magdalen in Whetstone and we changed the format to that of a cream tea, supported by quantities of Pimm’s and lemonade. This literally went down well with members and attendance was substantially increased compared with the previous year- although reverting to our traditional late August date also undoubtedly helped. I must thank all those who helped make the afternoon a success, in particular Kate, Maria and Yvonne who organised the cream tea. We did have one problem- the Church authorities -failed to have the grass in the garden cut for some weeks – so the day before the event saw me and our Treasurer hard at work with our lawnmowers!

- **The FBWRA Shrubbery**

Within Friary Park lies the FBWRA shrubbery – some years ago the Council agreed we could plant and maintain an unused bed in the upper park. Now each year and particularly during dry summer spells members of the Committee tend the plants and shrubs and periodically replace items that have died or been taken by members of the public. Carolyn organises this for us and does a great deal of the work – Thank you, Carolyn.

### **The Committee**

I must thank all the other officers and members of the FBWRA Committee for their support and for their efforts on behalf of the Association. In particular, I must thank them for their advice- collectively they are not only very knowledgeable – they are also very wise. Tim, Maria, Harry, Yvonne, Richard, Kate, Carolyn, Sachin and Graham – my thanks to all of you.

Harry and Kate are standing down from the Committee. They are both former Chairmen of the Association and Harry has been actively involved for over 20 years. On behalf of the entire Association I thank them for all they have done over the years.

During the year we made one significant change to how the Committee operates – we moved from monthly to bi-monthly meetings. We did this to free up time – some of the Committee lead quite busy lives. This change has worked but it does not seem to have impaired how we function.

As always we continue to look for others to join us. We have gaps in our skills we need to fill- in particular our website needs attention and Maria could make use of more support in managing our Facebook presence. There is also NextDoor which, if carefully managed, offers the potential to greatly increase our public profile.

Our need for support isn’t limited to communications – we would like more members to be actively involved across everything that we do, such as maintaining our shrubbery, writing articles for the Newsletter and assisting with its delivery. That involvement can be just occasional s- and it needn’t require sitting in meetings. If you would like to be more involved in our work please get in touch - **“Your Association needs you”!**

### **The Chairman**

One last thing. I was first elected Chairman of the Association in May 2019. Assuming that I am fortunate enough to be re-elected this year I intend to stand down from the role at the 2025 AGM. After 6 years it will be time for someone else to take over.

David Thompson, Chairman

21st March 2024