

## **TNRA CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2020-2021**

### **Covid-19**

The pandemic affected everyone's lives during the course of the year, and it still continues to do so. Nevertheless it does seem that at long last we can begin to look forward to the resumption of a more normal way of life during the course of 2021. In the meantime we need to seek formal approval of the various emergency decisions we took in March 2020 to enable us to act on your behalf during the past year:

- all of the 2019/20 Committee remained in office bar Annie Wingfield who had previously decided to resign after many years of valued service;
- having put her name forward for election former Committee member Meera Rajan was co-opted to help us with our activities;
- after initially postponing and reluctantly abandoning our AGM for the year ending March 2020 we circulated the Chair's Report and the Annual Accounts to all members;
- we cancelled all planned social events;
- we held all regular monthly Committee meetings by means of Zoom;
- we kept everyone in touch with news, information and the Committee's activities by means of our monthly e-Letters.

Thanks to these measures we managed to keep well on top of key issues and pursue requests from our members for action and advice. In addition we managed to maintain good contact (often daily) by email and phone with the Knight Frank estate office.

### **New appointments at Knight Frank and Trinity House**

As previously reported, very important and welcome changes took place during the course of the year ending March 2020. Louie-Mae Gibson took up the new post of Director, Trinity Village, in the Knight Frank estate office in the autumn of 2019; and following the retirement of Graham Hockley as Secretary to Trinity House Martin Atherton took his place as Secretary in November 2019. Relevant details concerning the further positive effect of their appointments are high-lighted below.

#### **Knight Frank estate office**

I would like to pay a personal tribute to the hard work, energy and professional approach that Louie-Mae Gibson has brought to the running of the estate office since her appointment in October 2019. Alongside creating and leading a new team (no mean task by itself) she has introduced a host of new systems and procedures that have radically improved planning, efficiency, response times and the provision of information.

Up until late 2019 members were contacting us every week (at times almost every day) to seek our advice and involvement in relation to a lack of information, action and communication being provided by the office concerning repair, maintenance and other issues. During the early months of 2020, however, it became clear that Louie-Mae and her team were making rapid progress in working through the backlog, and since the mid-year it became increasingly rare for anyone to seek our involvement in day-to-day management issues.

Louie-Mae's commitment to her task and to the estate can be measured by the number of times I and others find ourselves being phoned or emailed by her (sometimes late at night, and quite often over weekends) to provide information, to make suggestions or to seek our advice. Admittedly some people sometimes find her approach to be abrupt and blunt. However, there is no doubting the improvement in the speed and quality of service provided by the estate office over the past year, and that is down to her.

#### **Estate management**

##### Assured Short Tenancies (ASTs)

The new contract introduced in January 2020 appears to have been welcomed by the great majority of our members. Prior to the arrival of Covid-19 almost all rent reviews had resulted in increases of less than 3%. Since then almost all reviews have been set at 0%.

Nevertheless we learned in December 2020 that two households in Merrick Square had received notice from the estate office with proposals for their rents to be increased by very significant double-digit percentages when their current leases expired in May 2021. We established a three-person AST Sub-Committee to investigate matters and liaise with the two households concerned along with another one, the recipient of similar news in January 2021. We then held a number of lengthy meetings (three with Louie-Mae Gibson and one with Martin Atherton) to seek clarification of the reasoning behind this very unfortunate turn of events. During these meetings we were told – and subsequent investigation has confirmed this – that the rents paid by these households had fallen well behind current market rates, resulting in them paying very much less than their neighbours for properties of a similar size and in a similar condition. We were also informed that it was only five households that were concerned, that the situation that had arisen was entirely anomalous, that no other such differentials existed anywhere else on the estate, and that the big rent increases proposed in no way represented a change in rental policy. Nevertheless we urged Trinity House/Knight Frank to consider ways in which the introduction of the proposed increases should be mitigated e.g. by phasing them in over the period of new three-year leases.

At the time of writing we also know that Knight Frank have reduced their initial proposal in each case, but do not yet know whether the households concerned have agreed to the sums involved or not.

TNRA will continue to monitor the situation and to dig deeper into the specifics of Knight Frank's rental practice and procedures. In particular we will also seek further reassurance from both Knight Frank and Trinity House that these cases do not indicate a significant shift away from the past approach that balances rents in Trinity Village with the vital need to maintain the stability and well-being of the community. In short, we need to be absolutely certain that no policy has been adopted (or will be adopted) that is harmful to the strong sense of community, identity and continuity that is such a feature of the estate.

The following points concerning AST rents and rent reviews in general should also be noted:

(a) TNRA initiated a monthly rent and lease advice surgery for ASTs in May 2020. Of the fourteen households who have sought our advice since then all but one have been satisfied with their rent reviews which in most cases have resulted in 0% increases;

(b) in March we circulated a lease and rent survey to all 80 AST households which are TNRA members. These comprise 30% of the total of c. 270 AST properties in Trinity Village. At the time of writing 30 of our members have responded. The information they have provided appears to closely tally with what Knight Frank have told us about the rent reviews they have carried out over the course of the twelve months.

(c) in the last month Knight Frank have produced a useful [Brief guide to AST tenancy agreements in Trinity Village](#).

(d) we will continue to research matters related to AST law and practice with the aim of pursuing further improvements in AST contracts, including the replacement of the RPI index by the much more relevant CPI, CPI+H and other indices.

#### Property repairs, maintenance and service levels

In general, and despite the very significant challenges faced by the estate office staff in having to work from home for the greater part of the year, the service provided by Louie-Mae and her colleagues has remained both timely and efficient. This has also been confirmed by the responses to the Service Quality Survey we carried out in late November.

We continue to liaise closely with the estate office both formally and informally in meetings, by phone and in correspondence.

#### Long leasehold properties

Following many months of delayed and poor responses, inaction and failure to provide information, Trinity House stepped in to engage with Mainstay, managing agents for the long leasehold properties, at TNRA's specific request. The new property manager, John James, appears to be better than his predecessors.

Nevertheless, although Mainstay report direct to Trinity House, Martin Atherton has asked Louie-Mae to keep a watching brief over John James' performance.

### **Trinity House**

The Chair continues to hold quarterly meetings with Martin Atherton. Our most recent meeting has led to a useful exchange of views and ideas concerning how best to deal with the challenges presented by global warming and how best to maintain, restore and improve the design and architectural integrity of the buildings and the gardens on the estate. Concerning the latter point, one immediate initiative recently put in hand has been the examination of the currently poor state of the listed statue in Trinity Church Square and the presentation of proposals to clean, restore and properly maintain it.

### **Gardens**

Penny Hinves has played a vital role in supervising the work carried out by Knight Frank's gardening contractors until the termination of their contract in October. Since then she has been in charge of all gardening matters under a special interim arrangement with Knight Frank, and the cumulative results of her skilled work and oversight are clear to see. She will report herself on these and other matters including the unfortunate impact of increased wear and tear during lockdown on the lawns, plants and shrubs in both garden squares, what is being done to help them recover and, very importantly, a welcome and significant increase to the overall gardening budget for the estate.

Penny has as usual been assisted by those who volunteer their time to help out during our bi-annual garden action days and on other occasions.

### **Planning applications and developments**

We regularly report in our e-Letters on our submissions and representations concerning various planning proposals projects. The pandemic has delayed work on a number of developments including that for the Falmouth Road surgery site and the so-called King's Place site on the corner of Borough High Street and Harper Road. In the meantime it is encouraging to see that the planned improvements to the Dickens Square Park are proceeding well.

### **Grant applications**

The funds we won in conjunction with the Roebuck Action Group (aka the RAG) resulted in the installation and planting up of six steel plant troughs on the Roebuck piazza in late February. The provision of bike storage in Falmouth Road, once again financed by means of a successful grant application, is finally scheduled to take place in June/July.

We will continue to seek funds from the Council and other bodies to improve the built environment, including the provision of more plant troughs on the Roebuck piazza. In the meantime we hope that in December we will finally be able to make use of the £900 grant we were awarded by the North-West Multi-Award Neighbourhood Funds to pay for our December 2020 Christmas Carols, another event that Covid-19 forced us to cancel.

### **Refuse collection and street cleaning**

Covid-19 has caused disruptions to normal street-cleaning operations from time to time, but we continue to maintain close contact with the Council's cleaning team to ensure that household waste, leaf-fall and refuse left by fly-tippers is collected and removed speedily.

### **Community safety**

We continue to monitor and take action concerning incidents of crime, anti-social behaviour and other similar issues by means of regular attendance at meetings of the Chaucer Ward Safer Neighbourhood Panel and in meetings and correspondence with the local police. We also share relevant information and pursue action when appropriate with the Trinity Street estate office.

## Membership

Despite the baleful effects of Covid-19 and our consequent inability to make contact with existing and potential new members at events and on the doorstep we did very well in finishing the year with 206 members (cf. 211 in 2019/20; 210 in 2018/19; 223 in 2017/18; 206 in 2016/17; 216 in 2015/16; 204 in 2014/1514 – and 139 in 2010/11).

We hope that with a return to some form of normality our membership will climb once again to 210 and more.

## Events

Apart from the very welcome appearance of the Pop-up Bookstall when permitted during several non-lockdown periods it was impossible for us to arrange any of our normal programme of events. However we remain geared up and ready to spring into action whenever government regulations allow this.

## Filming

The pandemic resulted in almost no shoots taking place and therefore very little income. Nevertheless we have hopes that filming will recommence in the shape of a likely big BBC production in May or June.

## Information for members

We recently carried out a survey to give us a better idea as to how our members find and use our website, Facebook and our monthly e-Letters etc. As a result of the responses we have received we are now working on ways to improve the way we present and make such information available, including a redesign and representation of our website to make it more user-friendly.

## Finances

Our emergency budget decisions taken in March 2020 included taking steps to avoid all expenditure except that which was necessary to fund our basic administration costs and to ensure that we provided a regular and efficient communication and information service.

The highlights from our unaudited accounts shown below clearly indicate that we have managed to shepherd our resources well.

Detail	YE 2021 £	YE 2020 £	Diff'ce £	Notes
<b>INCOME</b>				
<b>General</b>				
Subscriptions	2,980	2,603	377	-
Misc.	436	700	(264)	-
Filming	1,750	6,600	(4,850)	Big decrease due to Covid-19
<b>Total General</b>	<b>5,166</b>	<b>9,903</b>	<b>(4,737)</b>	See above re decrease in filming fees
Events	1,240	5,568	(4,328)	No events – solely pop-up bookstall sales
Other	-	37	(37)	-
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>6,413</b>	<b>15,508</b>	<b>(9,095)</b>	See above re lack of filming and events
<b>EXPENSES</b>				
General	489	749	260	-
Events	98	6,694	6,596	Minor garden action day and other costs
Overheads	4,116	4,258	142	Includes Newsletter and e-Letter costs
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>4,703</b>	<b>11,701</b>	<b>6,998</b>	See above re lack of events
<b>Surplus/(Deficit)</b>	<b>1,712</b>	<b>3,807</b>	<b>(2,095)</b>	-
<b>Reserves</b>	<b>23,879</b>	<b>22,169</b>	<b>1,710</b>	-

### **Discount Programme**

The pandemic resulted in many of member firms being unable to open for long periods, but our members have nevertheless continued to support them in the hope that they will soon be able to recommence normal trading before too long. We will also continue to seek new shops, restaurants and outlets to join our scheme.

### **Communication with members**

Pending the time when we can start to organise public events once again we will continue to concentrate on keeping our members abreast of current issues, developments, events and news by means of the TNRA website, bi-annual Newsletters, the Trinity Street noticeboard, flyers, posters, the TNRA Facebook site and monthly e-Letters.

### **Volunteers**

We are glad to report that following recent appeals a number of members have come forward to offer their services to help during our garden action days and social events. We thank them as well as all our regular helpers for their invaluable support.

### **Equipment for hire**

Members continue to benefit from very reasonable rates to hire a wide variety of equipment including gazebos, tables, chairs and glasses.

Tim Horsler, TNRA Chair