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## **Minutes of Annual General Meeting**

held on Monday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2014 in the Seven Dials Club

### **1. Welcome and opening remarks by Jo Weir, Chair of CGCA.**

Jo opened the meeting at 6.30pm, welcomed everyone and explained that CGCA had opted for a low-key AGM on the same night as Dragon Hall and the Seven Dials Co-Op.

Noting that it was CGCA's 43<sup>rd</sup> year, Jo said that although much has changed in the lifetime of the Association, we still work to keep the fragile balance between commerce and community. The invasion of high street multiples is of particular concern, changing the character of the area. Ironically, none of these would have entertained the idea of moving to the area during the 1970's or 80's. But since the area was 'saved', partly through our own efforts, and then smartened up, big players have ironically pushed out almost all the independent shops and cafés. It is financially rewarding for landlords and retailers, but little of the employment is local, and the noise and pressure on infrastructure is intense.

Jo explained that we continued with our work, albeit in a different manner. More work is tackled with fewer meetings and more electronic communication. Our numerous tasks are delegated to those with the most understanding of each respective area, and important decisions come back to the Executive committee.

Jo thanked Mike Leeson for having so ably chaired the Planning Subcommittee in recent years, and Elizabeth Bax for taking over the reins in May; she also thanked Meredith Whitten for her assistance in co-ordinating the committee's work and for her expertise in planning. Jo thanked Amanda Rigby, who in her role as Vice-Chair has had various projects to tackle this year, most recently the government's Deregulation Bill and the minefield that it opens up in relation to short lets. Jo thanked David Kaner for leading the Association's work on licensing. A general vote of thanks to them was made by all present.

The way we run CGCA has changed, Jo explained, since the years when we received grants from Camden and Westminster councils. We would be entirely reliant on volunteers were it not for the very generous support from our many members and friends who continue to donate or show their support in kind. Many of our fellow amenity societies have also felt the 'cold wind of change' forcing a review of their structure, and we are all still working out how best to maintain a service for the community.

Jo gave a short summary of the Association's activity since the last AGM. She commented on the over one hundred meetings that we had taken part in during the year as part of 'doing our bit' for this still very precious part of London.

Jo thanked everyone involved in organising various events during the year. The street festival in the Autumn was another success, despite the rain, and Jo led a vote of thanks to Michelle Zini-Lopes, Jenny Healy and the rest of the team who organised it. Also of note was our very well attended annual community carol service at St Paul's church in December; our next one will be in one week's time.

### **2. Apologies**

Elizabeth Bax, Hon. Secretary of CGCA reported that apologies had been received from Michael Wilkinson of Dudley Court Tenants' Association. Councillor Sue Vincent passed on his comments

regarding planning consent for an extended building for the nursery underneath Dudley Court, which had not received consent even in its original form and which was causing problems to residents; this led to a short discussion of the case.

### 3. Minutes of the last AGM

The minutes of the last AGM were proposed by Amanda Rigby, seconded by Robert Bent, and approved by the meeting.

### 4. Reports on activities

#### Licensing

David Kaner, Chair of the CGCA's Licensing Subcommittee, gave a report on activities. During the past year CGCA had considered approximately 25 licensing applications submitted to either Westminster or Camden Councils. We worked in depth on applications for new licenses which could contribute to a cumulative negative impact on the area, and on material variations to existing licences where there was a threat to residential amenity. Work again included a number of useful pre-hearing negotiations with applicants to agree conditions. The most controversial application was probably the Hoxton hotel, which was granted a licence beyond 'framework hours' in the face of strong local opposition, albeit with hours reduced from those originally applied for. Many residents in the Newton Street area behind the hotel are affected by this. Camden council's licensing committee and notably Cllr. Thomas Gardiner have yet to provide a satisfactory explanation, and we are pursuing the matter with them.

David said that it was now unusual for applicants to attempt to apply for hours longer than 'framework hours' in Camden, or 'core hours' in Westminster. In response to a question from the floor, he explained that the terminal hours are the same (11.30pm Mon - Thurs, Midnight Fri & Sat, 10.30pm Sun), but the councils apply them slightly differently: in Westminster the premises must close by those times, but in Camden they are only required to have finished the licensable activity by then.

The main concerns of residents were reported as a) noise from people leaving premises late, either drunk or just noisy, and b) noise from servicing premises, especially glass bottle collections. David explained that for new licences, or for old ones when they apply for variations, we try to get conditions added to the licences that restrict hours of servicing, and we are generally successful.

David reported that food-led premises cause fewer problems than those that are alcohol-led. This can present difficulties for premises that change their nature in the evening, however. An example is a café unit in St. Giles Court that wanted to be able to serve drinks without food in the evening, so effectively becoming a bar. In this case we were successful in persuading Camden council's licensing committee that it was inappropriate.

David ended by urging anyone experiencing difficulty with licenced premises to contact CGCA and to make representations in their own right. He shared the appropriate contact details and also encouraged people to sign up for the council's licensing alerts.

Cllr. Vincent thanked CGCA for its work on behalf of local constituents in particular in the areas of licensing and planning, commenting on the diligence of our approach, our attention to detail and the fact that we 'know our stuff'. This is particularly helpful when it comes to writing policy. Jo passed on similar comments from Westminster council.

#### Planning

Elizabeth Bax, Chair of the CGCA's Planning Subcommittee, gave a report on activities. During the past year the subcommittee had met 24 times and discussed 212 applications: 79 in Camden, 133 in Westminster. The subcommittee meets with developers, takes comments from the local community and

considers applicable policies before making submissions to the local planning authority in the CGCA's role as the amenity society for the area.

Elizabeth said that the largest developments over the period included Parker Tower – the redevelopment of a 1970's office block to 46 residential units plus mixed uses on the ground and first floors. Councillor Sue Vincent confirmed to the meeting that this had recently been given consent. Burleigh House and the Wellington block is another office to residential conversion with 38 units. A mixed-use site at 6-9 Great Newport Street is to be replaced with a 66 bedroom hotel, theatre, arts club, sports facilities etc. And in between King Street and Floral Street a large-scale mixed-use redevelopment loosely known as King's Court includes the creation of a new pedestrian through route. The redevelopment of the Africa Centre at 38 King Street - a major application for us last year - now has consent, but no works have started.

There were a number of very contentious applications, the largest one being the old Post Office site at the top of Drury Lane, to whose unsympathetic design and lack of affordable housing CGCA and Bloomsbury Association have jointly objected along with a large number of local people. We organised 2 public meetings as well as numerous meetings with the developers, and have so far won concessions in relation to a public roof garden, a doctor's surgery, and smaller retail units.

Elizabeth highlighted other causes of concern, which include the development of a large restaurant in Bedford Street with a very limited servicing area and extension at the back; the site lies beneath private residential units and very close to two big social housing blocks at the back on Bedfordbury (Davies Court and Duval Court). A new application is at 90 Long Acre, which proposes demolition of this extensive block and two new buildings up to 11 storeys high with a mix of uses; there have been objections from all sides. An application in Cambridge Circus has become particularly contentious due to A5 (take-away) being applied for as an add-on to an existing restaurant who turned out to be an outgoing tenant, and the A5 permission was passed on to McDonald's within a couple of months.

Elizabeth awarded 'the prize for the most tardy application' to The Hospital Club, for their service road. The application was made in March 2012, and is still awaiting a decision in Camden; in the meantime the disruption continues that started in 2003.

We continue to see a large number of applications to both boroughs for a change of use from offices to residential units, to which we usually object as we do not wish to lose the small, low cost offices that contribute to the character of the area. Cllr. Robert Davies, Deputy Leader of Westminster, has spoken out against this loss of small office space, but most applications seem to be successful.

The reason that we do not prefer residential conversions is that the majority of new residential development in the area in the past decade seems to have gone to relatively short term tenants (6 months at a time), and, even worse, to holiday lets of as little as a night at a time. There has been an increase in the number of companies approaching homeowners and promoting holiday lets. Sales of new developments fall about 50/50 to buyers at home and abroad.

Elizabeth explained that our Planning Co-ordinator, Meredith Whitten, places the new agenda for each Planning Subcommittee on the website each fortnight, closely followed by the minutes. She is currently working on a spreadsheet to show the decisions made for the applications we have commented on, which is not an easy task as decisions are not made in order of application date.

### Environment

Amanda Rigby, Vice-Chair, reported on a trial by Camden of three daily refuse collections around Seven Dials including a later, 9am collection for residents. This had been pushed for as much by commercial interests (particularly retailers) who want to see tidy streets, as by residents who want to have a reliable routine at a viable time on which they can rely; the pressure of commercial pressures had been very helpful. Servicing continues to be a major issue throughout the area.

There was a short discussion about the desirability of re-establishing an Environment Subcommittee and Gary Hays said that he would have an interest in being involved with this if it were to operate.

### Public Realm

Amanda also reported on the activity of 'Area 3' steering group, which actually works beyond its strict remit in Westminster because it is one of the few cross-border meetings at the moment (ie: including officers from both councils). One recent piece of work was the closure of the North West end of Earlham Street in Camden, which seems to be working well to prevent rat-running through Seven Dials off Shaftesbury Avenue. The closure opens the way for work on improvements to Earlham Street market. In this regard Amanda informed the meeting that the only way found to expedite the project had been for private sector interests in the area (Shaftesbury plc) to pay for an officer at Camden to co-ordinate the work. While such an arrangement might not be a massive conflict interest in the case of the market project, the increasing incidence of private interests supporting council officers on all sorts of projects, particularly in Westminster, was a difficult situation. Amanda urged vigilance and commented that transparency was essential.

The lighting project led by the Seven Dials Trust was nearly finished. And their new projects, including unique street name plates and history plaques for the streets and buildings around Seven Dials, were progressing well. Amanda explained that the 'people's plaques' celebrated interesting local people from the past who might not quite merit the traditional English Heritage 'blue plaque' but were nevertheless historically important.

With regard to traffic, serious concerns were voiced about the 'West End Project'. CGCA believes that the diversion of traffic away from Endell Street etc. may double the traffic in Seven Dials. Councillor Vincent and David Bieda joined the discussion, and it was explained that the initiative intended to improve traffic flow north of New Oxford Street by removing the Tottenham Court Road and Gower Street one-way gyratory and making both of them 2-way to buses and Gower Street 2-way to all traffic. An improved public space around Princes Circus would involve cutting off access to Endell Street from traffic moving South. Amanda commented that any increase in traffic would be dispiriting for those who had worked so hard on improvements in Seven Dials over recent years. Richard Cohen commented that we should not resolve to oppose the scheme, and this was agreed, not least because the scheme already has a lot of momentum and in any case we have no wish to stand in the way of improving congestion in Bloomsbury. There was some confusion about the current level of traffic in Seven Dials, and those living locally assured the meeting that Monmouth Street and Mercer Streets were already sometimes gridlocked. The main thrust of CGCA's activity would continue to be to urge Camden to listen to our concerns and take measures to prevent the increase in congestion that we fear from the displacement of traffic into Seven Dials.

Robert Bent asked whether we should re-instate the CGCA's paper forms for people to complete and submit to the council to comment on street problems such as broken pavements etc. There was a short discussion and it was agreed that putting a similar facility on the CGCA website would allow people more effectively to feed their comments directly to the council.

## **5. Election of Chair and Executive Committee Members**

The following Executive Committee members were re-elected: Jo Weir as Chair, Elizabeth Bax as Hon. Sec, Robert Bent, Margaret Houston, Shirley Gray, Amanda Rigby as Vice-Chair, and Michelle Zini-Lopes.

Councillor Vincent commended the work of CGCA in a difficult environment, and apologised for having to leave the meeting to start the AGM for Dragon Hall in the adjoining room.

**6. Report and Accounts for the financial year ending 31.3.14**

Amanda Rigby explained that, because of the scheduling of the AGM with relatively little notice, there had not been time to complete the annual accounts. These were still in draft form and due to undergo independent examination after Christmas. She announced that there would be an Extraordinary General meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> January to propose these and hopefully approve them.

However, based on the draft accounts, Amanda reported that the financial position was very similar to the end of the previous financial year. Expenditure on projects such as the archiving and the history film and exhibition had been project funded. Running costs had exceeded income from other sources (memberships, donations, small grants and the surplus from the street festival) by about £1,500 which was drawn from reserves.

**7. A.O.B**

Shirley Gray brought up the subject of glass recycling by restaurants, commenting that most good establishments now have internal crushing machines that make the collections much quieter than disposing of intact bottles. Gary Hays explained to the meeting about the market in crushed glass, called 'cullet'. Jo confirmed that we would press for a condition to install these in all restaurants making planning or licensing applications.

Gary Hays also commented that Westminster council is in the process of updating their planning policy in relation to environmental factors ('City Management Plan').

**9. Close**

There being no further business, Jo thanked those who had stood for the Executive committee and everyone was invited to join attendees of the Dragon Hall AGM for seasonal refreshments. The meeting closed at 7.10pm.

Signed as a true record of the meeting:

Dated:

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Jo Weir, Chair