

MINUTES OF HERNE HILL SOCIETY EGM

WED 13 NOVEMBER 2019

1. An Extraordinary General Meeting of the Herne Hill Society focusing on the future of the Society was held on Wednesday 13 November 2019 at the Herne Hill Baptist Church, Half Moon Lane, Herne Hill, at 7:45 PM.
2. 26 people attended, all except one being members of the Society. Committee members attending were Colin Wight, Laurence Marsh, Martyn Hall, Pat Roberts, Henry Ferguson and Jackie Plumridge. Membership Secretary Val Suebsaeng sent her apologies, as she was abroad. The EGM was accordingly deemed to be quorate.
3. Apologies were received from: Stephen Cargill, Linda Casbolt, Patrick Dennison, Robert and Judy Foster, Sue Gallagher, Frances Lamb, Richard Norman, Alan Piper, Jeff Segal, Anne Sharpley and Fred Taggart.
4. The meeting was opened by Pat Roberts, Secretary, who drew attention to the single item on the agenda and invited Colin Wight, Chair, to present the suggestions of the Committee in response to the challenges created by the declining membership of the Committee and the announcement that three of its members would not stand again at the next AGM in March 2020.
5. The Chair explained that under its constitution the Society must have four officers and not less than five other members, i.e. a Committee of nine as a minimum. However the Committee currently stood at only seven. Further, and more seriously, two of the officers (Chair and Secretary) and one other key member, the Membership Secretary, had stated that they were unable to continue as members or officers for a variety of personal reasons. (This was, for instance, the seventh consecutive year he had served as Chair.)
6. So unless they could be replaced by next March, when elections were due, the Society would not be in a position to continue, either constitutionally or in practical terms.
7. The Chair went on to outline the nominal roles of each of the officers and of the Membership Secretary, adding that their actual responsibilities went much wider. In particular, many other essential tasks that could theoretically be carried out by other Committee members, or indeed by volunteers not on the Committee, were at present being performed by the Chair and the small number of other active officer: a workload that could not be sustained in the long run. Even then, some valuable tasks were being done inadequately or not at all.
8. The Chair emphasised that if the Society was to survive, and better still prosper, five energetic, hands-on people were needed to step forward to fill those three key roles plus the two other existing Committee vacancies. And they should be prepared to commit for at least two years, otherwise the Society would find itself back in the same situation next year. Yet calls over the last year or more for people to join the Committee had achieved no bankable responses.

9. The Committee had accordingly, after much discussion, identified three options:
 - i. **Option 1: The Society cuts its activities to those which could be supported by a new and relatively inexperienced committee while it got up to speed.** This would involve election of a new Chair and officers and prioritising activities in order to keep the Society alive until it regained its strength. An amendment of the constitution may be necessary. Other activities may need to be suspended or reduced, such as public events, publishing and bookselling, the monthly electronic newsletter, and the Magazine.
 - ii. **Option 2 (if Option 1 failed): The Society seeks a merger with another compatible organisation.** This would involve identifying and then negotiating with such organisations. (No such contact had been made to date.) At the March 2020 AGM, a new Chair and officers would need to be elected with a mandate to hold meaningful votes with both sets of members before and at AGMs, to consider changes to both Constitutions and to secure Charity Commission permission.
 - iii. **Option 3 (if Options 1 & 2 had both failed): At the March 2020 AGM, the Society's members agreed to winding-up by December 2020.** This could involve election of a new or the existing Chair and officers to execute the winding-up; meaningful votes by members at and after AGM; and reporting to the Charity Commission.
10. In the course of an extended Question & Answer session before and after the break, the following points were made.
11. The membership of the Society had remained stable, at 300 - 330 members over the years, with a few renewals each year, but for the most part they (as illustrated by those present this evening) were generally retired people and were inevitably getting older as the years passed, and for the most part, understandably, did not feel able to nominate themselves for the positions that would shortly be vacant. Could we appeal to a wider cross-section/demographic of the Herne Hill community? Several appeals had been launched, along with a comprehensive membership survey, but to no avail as yet
12. Did we need to be literally a Charity? Could many or some of the functions presently being carried out be done by some other legal structure? On the other hand, the credibility and authority exercised by an established, independent and not-for-profit civic amenity body, like the Herne Hill Society, was exceedingly valuable when challenging the plans and decisions of over-mighty bodies such as councils and property developers. Promoting high standards of planning and architecture, and securing the preservation, protection and improvement of features of historic or public interest, were primary objectives of the Society as stated in its constitution. Would this authority and mandate be diluted by a change of status?
13. Do we need to charge membership fees? Do they deter potential members? Could abolishing membership fees remove one of the onerous management functions that weighed on the Committee?

14. Would an “*Option 1 Light*” be worth pursuing? Could work be reduced if existing activities were delivered in different ways? For example, so many more publications were now consumed in an online format, even though some people still preferred to read a printed magazine. Could the workload of the Committee be reduced if this and other responsibilities and traditions of the Society could be reduced to the essentials - or alternatively carried out by (younger?) volunteers who might be more adept at, e.g. social media management, membership management and general publicity, possibly using some of the Society’s financial assets to pay the wages of such new activists (see paragraph 18 below)? It was suggested that this was worth considering, given that the Society’s current shape and legal status was laid down well over 30 years ago. Society in general had changed greatly since then, as well as the demographic in Herne Hill itself. Renewal or re-launching in a more up-to-date format was worth considering. But in any event a new Chair and new committee members or other volunteers, almost certainly younger than the Committee’s present generation, would still need to be found, elected and become semi-operational so as to be able to take over by March 2020. Prompt action was needed.
15. Should we re-examine the primary objectives of the Society in case this would help us focus on what is its essential purpose and possibly shed any extraneous activities? The primary objectives of the Society (as stated in the constitution) are
- i.i. to promote high standards of planning and architecture in or affecting the area of benefit [= Herne Hill]*
 - i.ii. to educate the public in the geography, history, natural history and architecture of the area of benefit.*
 - i.iii. to secure the preservation, protection, development and improvement of features of historic or public interest in the area of benefit*
- and the constitution (Article 2) sets out the powers that the Society enjoys in pursuing these objectives.
16. The First World War project, involving not just the war memorial but also the extended research project in partnership with the Charter School North Dulwich had indeed helped the Society to engage with a new, younger demographic - not just the students but, perhaps more importantly their parents. Some of them had joined the Society. But in practice, and maybe disappointingly, this had not generated interest in taking a role in running the Society, presumably because the working parents of teenage children have precious little time to spare on what they might see as inessential activities.
17. Emerging from the discussions during the break, there were encouraging signs that if some younger people, with different mindsets and experiences, could be involved, a different but still recognisable and acceptable Society might be preserved. Commending this approach, several people emphasised that Herne Hill deserved and needed an organisation which could forcefully represent local interests faced with planning and local authority decision-making and other threats to the unique character of the locality, whilst not overlapping with the valuable work done by the Herne Hill Forum. This seemed to require an

organisation which understood, focused on and represented just that special local character as it evolved, whilst it was appropriate that the nature of the organisation should also adjust to keep in step with a younger generation of residents.

18. It was also suggested that the problem of human resources and time, which currently hampered the Committee's work, could be partially resolved by employing people with some specialist skills, for example in publicity for the Society and in exploiting social media more emphatically, so as to attract more people to support the Society's activities, join it and possibly support its work as volunteers or Committee members. This might offset the danger that in reducing its activities even temporarily to allow a new regime to get up to speed, the Society could inadvertently lessen its reach and appeal - a loss which would take some time to repair. Hiring help to perform some of the activities that the Committee found onerous could leave them time to focus on more important tasks and give greater thought to the future shape and strategy of the Society.
19. Winding up, Laurence Marsh, Vice-Chair, found that the emerging sense of the meeting was that most people present would definitely want the Society to continue (Option 1 in some form, called loosely *Option 1a*). Accordingly could the Committee be tasked with assessing the recommendations and thoughts that were emerging over the evening and on that basis making a revised plan which could be reported back to the membership in, say, a month's time? Supporting this search for a solution, could a group be formed of people, semi-detached from the Committee if appropriate, and involving several of the people present during this meeting and possibly others (younger perhaps?) to be co-opted, to advise on alternative structures and ways forward in the future, possibly with some amendments to the constitution in due course? (It would be important, some noted, that the participants in this group should not to be side-tracked by becoming involved in the current activities of the Committee.)
20. This approach was agreed.
21. The Chair pointed out however that if this course of action failed, we would need to revert to Option 2 or Option 3, and preparations for these options could not responsibly be left to the last minute. Would the meeting wish to instruct the Committee to explore, without commitment, how we would implement these options if the need arose? On a show of hands, this was agreed 17 to 4.
22. In conclusion it was agreed that the Committee should promptly contact those who had indicated a willingness to help, and any others who came forward, with a view to setting up a work programme that could deliver recommendations back to the membership within two/three months.