

# The Soho Society

## 44<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting Minutes

26 April 2018 at St Anne's Community Hall, 55 Dean St, Soho, 6pm

1. Welcome: Chairman Tim Lord opened the meeting, welcoming the members.
2. Chair's report: Tim concisely outlined the infrastructure of the Society, mentioning its charity registration, regular meetings of the Board of Directors/Trustees, as well as the Planning and Licensing meetings, noting that we now have no paid employees, but rely on volunteers. Current concerns include the Oxford Street pedestrianisation proposal, threats to the GP practice at Soho Square and the future use of the former Hospital for Woman building, and holding Westminster City Council to account for its ties to developers. Richard Piercy added information about the project to use photographs of local people on the Crossrail Dean Street ticket hall hoardings, as well as the project to promote a Soho brand beer that would provide additional funding for the Society. Tim also mentioned plans for a loyalty scheme for independent Soho businesses, our joint sponsorship with St Anne's of the annual Silver Tea, our Christmas fair, paella supper evenings, and the forthcoming Soho Fete on 1 July
3. Financial report: Lyn Blackman, Treasurer, reported that operations through December 2017 show a profit of £757, but this is after a prior year adjustment of £3,819; therefore a trading loss of £3,062 was posted for the year. Administration has now reverted to volunteer help and the Clarion has been revised to make sure it breaks even, thus avoiding the main factors contributing to the losses. It is expected that will post a profit for 2018. Revenue is targeted at £37,495, an increase of 10%. This is to be raised from membership, fundraising and events.
4. Planning: Matthew Bennett reported that the Planning Committee received 452 applications in 2017, of which 68 objections (14%) were made. Asking for conditions and suggestions for improvement were made for 38 applications (8%). The Government's continued liberalisation of planning law means that many things that previously required WCC's consent no longer do, e.g., phone "boxes" with the main function as advertising boards. Consent for multiple simultaneous planning use, gives the owners flexibility, but makes Council control difficult. The increase in internet shopping and the subsequent losses to retail shops has led landlords to seek conversion from retail to restaurant & café use. However there is evidence that restaurants and cafes are struggling financially. We support the many applications for tables & chairs if they are well run and do not obstruct the pavement. The Council's policy is that at least 2 metres of pavement space should be left free for pedestrians. If members have complaints about tables & chairs, they should complain to the Council. If they do so, also make sure their complaint is given a reference number; we can log the complaints and oppose further renewal of the street trading licence. Narrow streets and pavements in Soho mean that more people are walking in the streets. We may need to consider greater use of shared surfaces, where pedestrians and vehicles share the same space, which has the effect of reducing speeds.

Housing is a key issue and we were pleased by the Council's announcement that they will now expect affordable as part of large developments to be provided on site or in the vicinity

of the scheme. We were also pleased to see that a couple of applications for conversions into very small hotels with no facilities have been refused since such would become perpetual short-term letting spaces.

Although traffic is the main source of air pollution, roughly 40% is emitted from buildings. We therefore need to focus on heating & cooling, as well as efficient delivery & service plans. We have had concerns about the proposal to pedestrianise Oxford Street and have noted that on 20 March WCC confirmed that no decision will be taken until the Council and TfL have looked in detail at every issue raised by local residents and businesses.

Unfortunately from our view, the London Plan and Westminster's plans support hotel use in Soho. Current projects include 52/53 Poland Street and 18-24 Broadwick with 83 Berwick Street, which displace commercial buildings that provided permanent employment for people often in creative industries, thus changing the character of Soho. We have objected to such applications, considering the increase in noise and traffic also, but have been overruled by the Council. In Meard Street an application has been granted to transform the old film laboratory into retail, gym and office space. We opposed the ground floor use, but supported the aspect of the scheme that the Soho Housing Association to obtain a 999-year lease on the upper parts known as Royalty Mansions.

Soho Estates are proceeding with the Walkers Court & Boulevard Theatre project, which should be externally complete by the end of this year. Their other major project is the Ilona Rose House in Charing Cross Road on the old Foyles site.

Matthew also presented the Soho Society Planning Policies and asked for approval of additional policies on hotels, air quality, electric charging infrastructure, and freight consolidation. Approval of the additional policies was approved by the members.

5. Licensing: Marina Tempia spoke the written report, noting that the committee had considered 127 licence applications since the last AGM for premises selling or planning to see alcohol and for sexual entertainment venues. This was slightly more than the previous year and representations (objections) were made to 26 of these. Strategic management of licensing helps with prevention of crime, disorder and nuisance; we will object to applications that cannot demonstrate that they will not have a negative impact. Final decisions of course rest with WCC. Thanks again were given to Richard Brown of Westminster CAB for his advice and support. As with planning applications, if members have complaints, the Society can help. Residents are encouraged to write in and to attend hearings, which can help determine outcomes.

Marina and Jane Doyle surveyed the streets of Soho in September, counting the number of licenced venues in this small area bounded by Oxford St, Regent St, Shaftesbury Ave and Charing Cross Rd.; Restaurants 227, Cafes 90, Bars 52, Pubs 45, Take-aways 32, Clubs 15, Hotels 10, Ice Cream Parlours 9, Casinos 1.

6. Executive Board elections: Four members of the Board stood down for re-election: Margaret Bloomer, David Evans, David Gleeson and Lisa Sheehy. Lucy Haine and Quentin Thompson were nominees for the two vacancies. All were elected by acclamation.

7. Amendment of the Society's constitution: The Chair asked for authority for the Executive to amend the constitution to clarify that the Society may hold intellectual property rights and licence the same. This was granted by the members present.

8. Any other business: (a) Closing remarks were made by Matthew, noting the new energy and forward looking approach within the Executive.

(b) Leslie Hardcastle, Hon. President, reminded us of past campaigns and victories. He also called our attention to Soho Radio and the weekly programme, the Soho Society hour, which to date has had 254 guests.

(c) Wendy Hardcastle called for more people to join in the campaign to save the PG practice that has suffered from commercial pressures from management businesses and the loss of Chinese-speak doctors. The local health authority has not been co-operating with the Patients Participation Group. More protests from patients and the community are necessary to maintain the GP practice as well as the medical and community use of the Soho Square building, the former Hospital for Women.

The meeting ended at 7.05pm and was followed by lively hustings for the May 3<sup>rd</sup> local council elections chaired by Nina Tempia.

Bob O'Dell

Secretary