



Hastings Sierra Leone Friendship Link

bringing two communities together



Registered charity no. 1127137

www.hastingshastings.org.uk

Chairperson's Annual Report 2014

Introduction

This has been my first year as Chair of the Link and I accepted it with some trepidation knowing that Roger's time in office would be a hard act to follow given the tremendous energy and commitment he had put into developing the links with our Twin Town and especially the links with schools and his work with the British Council. I am sure everybody would join me in thanking Roger for his hard work as Chairman, which of course he continues with the same commitment in respect of the school exchange programme. Little did I know it was to be even more challenging than I expected with the events that unfolded during the year.

None of us can really imagine what it must have been like to live through the peak of the Ebola outbreak or its impact on the Hastings community. With two Ebola Treatment Centres on their doorstep and the influx of victims and health teams it must have been, and possibly still is, the most traumatic experience for the community since the rebel war over a decade ago.

It certainly focussed our minds and determination to raise as much as we could to try to help sustain normality as far as possible for the community but it was a huge challenge. We can only hope that the little we were able to do made some difference and at least let the community know that we cared and we're trying.

Recovery from the effects of the outbreak will be just as challenging, if not more so, than recovering from the rebel war. The impact of school closures for almost a year on attitudes to education, particularly for young girls is a real issue and it is taking time for children to return to school and to convince parents again how important education is. The lasting impacts on children, be it abuse, unwanted pregnancies or the care of orphaned children; will take longer to overcome once more. It is a huge setback for what had been good progress on education.

Likewise the impact on the local economy has been seriously damaging, with movement restrictions and the inability to work or to sell produce at markets severely reducing family incomes. Rebuilding the local economy and helping the community establish new businesses is the another key challenge for all aid agencies.

The outbreak has also highlighted how poor the health infrastructure was before and how ill-equipped it was to deal with even routine health issues and even more so with an outbreak such as Ebola. The important thing now is to maintain the momentum in improvement of health services that the outbreak has built up and encourage the Sierra Leone Government and foreign aid agencies to help rebuild the long term health infrastructure so it is able to deal with all endemic health issues, be it Malaria, HIV, TB, etc. along with improvements to facilities for ante and post-natal care.

There is no doubt the Link has a part to play in all of these but we have to recognise that we are not the only nor often the best placed to address these issues. We need to understand what other agencies and charities are doing for the Hastings community and then work with the community to complement rather than compete with other initiatives, and ensure that what

little we can do with the funds we raise is to good effect and focussed on sustainable projects which do not continue to rely on future charitable funding.

God willing we are coming slowly to the end of the current outbreak and now is the time to discuss with the community and the Sierra Leone Hastings Association how we can best support the recovery. At the end of my report I will be announcing a draft strategy for the Link's work and priorities for consultation and discussion with all parties. It is hoped that by the time we are able to plan our next trip we will have clarity about what we want to help the community achieve and over what timescale.

Management of the Link

Moving on to the events of 2014;

Committee Meetings

Our General Committee met on six occasions during the year to hear reports from the Treasurer and the conveners of sub-committees and to discuss all issues affecting the work of the Link.

Sub-Committee Meetings

Regular meetings of the sub-committees for Health and for Education took place throughout the year, ably chaired by Christine and Roger.

Partnership Activities with the Community of Hastings Sierra Leone

Exchange Visits:

In February a party of 21 travelled to Sierra Leone accompanied by Yvonne Johnson. Teachers in the party worked for a week in schools, whilst others worked with the staff of the Health Centre, on biogas and waste projects and the start of digging wells at two of the linked schools. Roger's report on the school exchange programme will expand further on the work with the schools.

In May a party of 9 Sierra Leone teachers and Kainde Pearce, the former Headman in Hastings, Sierra Leone, came to England. The teachers spent a week in their partner schools and enjoyed a full programme of education activities. Kainde worked with Hastings Borough Council to learn more about waste management and environmental issues. We were also able to show them some of our heritage and history in the locality, including trips to Bodiam Castle, a ride on the Tenterden steam railway (with an impromptu Spitfire air display) and a visit to Saint Mary's Church in Rye.

Health Centre:

The year saw the completion of the extension to the Health Centre. And funds were also allocated to build the perimeter wall to improve security, the safety of staff and prevent 'land grab'. Little did we know how much more important this was to become with the Ebola crisis.

During the year essential health equipment was kindly donated locally or purchased and in October 51 boxes of medical supplies and protective equipment were sent out to the Health Centre to help protect staff and prevent infection. Thanks must go to Christine and her team for

their efforts in sorting, packaging and labelling the goods for shipment. A further £700 was also sent for the purchase of additional personal protective equipment.

We also learned of work by another charity, Concern Worldwide, who were to build an incinerator and toilet cubicles. There was also talk of constructing a Septic Tank which was odd as we had already funded this and seen it in place during the February visit.

Funds were also used to help repair the water tower which had been knocked down by a tree and to fund a generator for the Health Centre because of electrical supply problems.

These issues have raised broader questions around how the Health Centre is governed and who determines priorities for funding and who provides funding. I have been corresponding with Dr Samba, the local Health Officer to clarify these matters so that we are sure that what we are being asked to support are the correct priorities and that we are not simply substituting other available funding streams.

Work to improve facilities and conditions at the Health Centre continues, however, and the St Leonards Rotary Club here is working with the Link to raise funds for a more sustainable and reliable electricity supply at the Health Centre using a combination of mains electricity, solar power and the generator. They held a quiz in February, a cycle challenge more recently and are organising a dinner/dance on 10 July. Our thanks go to Eric and his colleagues at the Rotary Club for their fundraising efforts.

Waste and Recycling

During the February visit, along with Kevin Monson, an independent consultant, I was able to introduce a more advanced design of bio-digester at three sites and work with the Kissy Technical institute to develop manuals on their design, construction and operation so that students could learn about them as part of their curriculum. We understand two of the units are still operating at houses in the village but we have lost contact with the Technical Institute where the technology was to be integrated into their alternative energy curriculum.

Schools

Roger has continued his work to expand the number of schools linking with schools in Sierra Leone. The inability to visit has made maintaining momentum difficult which Roger will report on more fully in his report.

Two of our schools had raised funds for wells to be dug at their linked schools and work was started on these during the February 2014 visit supervised by Derek. The work is now completed and the schools have their own water supplies for the first time.

Food Aid

One of the major impacts of the Ebola Outbreak was the loss of family incomes due to lack of work. The Link therefore organised the distribution of food aid to the most needy in the Hastings community, identified with the help of the Sierra Leone Hastings Association in both countries and local community representatives. The first consignment was distributed just in time for Christmas and a further consignment with additional funds from the Sierra Leone Hastings Association and from Act on It has been distributed more recently.

Fund Raising

The Ebola crisis made fundraising even more of a priority during 2014. Work to raise the profile of the Link through increased press coverage, a new trifold leaflet and banner, a new Facebook site etc. have all had some effect. In the light of increasing media coverage and desire for publicity a draft Media Protocol was produced to set out some clear guidelines about how the Link should present itself and create a more consistent and 'professional' image. Wider publicity of the Charity Checkout and Gift Aid facilities has also had a positive effect. The concern is however that we have not gained greatly in committed membership as a consequence and we need to continue to develop ways of marketing the Link and attracting new members.

We must offer our special thanks all of our members and our friends and colleagues in the community for the tremendous efforts they have made during the year. We must also thank Hastings Borough Council for its continued support even in the face of severe financial constraints it faces and we hope this will continue.

An increasingly wide range of events took place during the year and raised significant sums for the work to continue:

- Over the Christmas period 2013 and into 2014 the 'orange quiz sheets' designed by Robin Gray and Nola McSweeney proved extremely popular once again.
- A hugely successful quiz night masterminded by the same team was held in March.
- Some used the LOAF Walk in May to raise sponsorship.
- In July an African Family BBQ in St Helen's woods saw our London friends join us for a wonderful afternoon of music, fine food and drink in a beautiful setting
- In September we held a hugely successful 'Posh and not so Posh' jumble sale at Christ Church, organized by a team led by Liz MacKay.
- A Gala Concert was held in St Mary in the Castle in October with entertainment from Sussex Brass, the Robertsbridge Community Choir and the Ecstatic Republic of Conga. It was wonderful to have a large contingent of our Sierra Leonean friends from London joining us in this atmospheric venue for a fantastic and varied musical event.
- Five members eventually managed to do a freefall parachute jump in November after several attempts were thwarted by the weather.
- Dain Jensen, one of our Patrons, also ran the Beachy Head Marathon and raised a significant sum for the Link.
- In November we were also invited to the 10th anniversary celebrations of the White Rock Hotel, whose proprietor, Laurence Bell, has been a supporter of our work. Derek and I hosted 'Play Your Cards Right' which proved very popular with guests and raised funds for the Link.
- Schools have continued to undertake a variety of fund-raising efforts, including the Universal Children's Day school fundraising, which because they have been unable to visit were used to help support the 212 Teachers in Sierra Leone who had been unable to work during the Ebola outbreak.

- We have also received generous donations from fundraising by the local community including the Hastings & Eastbourne branch of Unison, staff at the Department of Transport offices who organised a 'Cheese Fest', carol singing organised in the St Helen's area, St Helens Church Tithing and at the Priory Meadow Christmas lights event.

Partnership with the Sierra Leone Hastings Association (UK):

We have continued to be privileged to have such good friends amongst the Sierra Leonean diaspora in London. Your chairman and his partner along with Roger and Margaret were warmly welcomed at the Association's Valentine Dance.

Yvonne Johnson and Yvette John and others were regular visitors to our events in Hastings, always bringing a choice buffet – to the BBQ, the AGM, the School Soccer Tournament, and the Gala Concert.

We warmly thank the Association and the Church of the Good Shepherd for their generous support and donations throughout the year.

In Conclusion

2014 has been an extremely challenging and worrying year as we watched in despair from a distance the tragic events that unfolded in Sierra Leone and neighbouring Guinea and Liberia. These events made us even more determined to raise funds and raise the profile and plight of the Hastings, SL community. There is no doubt that without the efforts of all of our members and friends in the community we could not have achieved what we have.

Now that the Ebola outbreak is coming to an end there is likely to be a lot of support from many countries and sources for those countries affected. We must refocus efforts and be clear about what we want to do to help the Hastings community in particular. We need to understand what their priorities are and listen to them. We need to work with them to provide help that will support sustainable projects that will continue without a reliance on more funds in the future, so that we can make progress and introduce other new initiatives. We need to have a clearer vision about what our priorities are and what we want to achieve in partnership with the community and the Sierra Leone Hastings Association.

To this end I present a first draft strategy for the Link entitled 'Aiding the post-Ebola recovery – Link Strategy to 2020. This is very much a first draft and we need feedback and contributions from everybody here, from the Sierra Leone Hastings Association and the community in Hastings, SL to ensure that it is what the community wants. We will be discussing the draft further at the next Ordinary General Meeting so any feedback in advance of that would be welcomed. If anybody wishes to discuss any part of it please do not hesitate to contact me or one of the other Trustees.

I close by thanking my colleague officers on the Committee and Trustees of the Link for their hard work throughout the year. Beyond those with specific roles there are many others who attend our rather ad-hoc Committee meetings and support us at various events and in different ways during the year.

Richard Homewood 2015
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