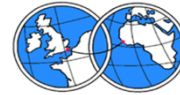




Hastings Sierra Leone Friendship Link

bringing two communities together



Registered charity no. 1127137

www.hastingshastings.org.uk

Chairperson's Annual Report 2015

Introduction

My second year as Chair of the Link has proved as equally challenging as the first. As the battle against Ebola gained momentum and it seemed at last that the combined efforts of world aid agencies and dedicated medical staff on the ground were winning the fight, efforts continued here to raise funds for immediate supplies for the Health Centre and the community in Hastings.

At last toward the end of the year the news came that Sierra Leone had been declared Ebola free and planning for a possible visit by a small group to see first-hand what the impact of Ebola on the community had been, began in earnest.

It was widely recognised that recovery from the effects of the outbreak would be just as challenging, if not more so, than recovering from the rebel war. The impact of school closures for over a year on attitudes to education, convincing parents again how important education is and the time it had taken time for children to return to school, all combined to set back the good progress that had been made on education.

Rebuilding the local economy and helping the community establish new businesses is another key challenge for all aid agencies.

The outbreak had 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 Link had continued to do what it could to support the Hastings Health Centre and get funds and supplies to it.

It was therefore with some anticipation and relief that we were able to send a small group to visit and assess the situation in February this year. My thanks go to those who made the journey, Roger, Christine and Richard and to Yvonne, without whose support and guidance, the visit would not have happened.

The visit enabled Roger to assess the impact Ebola had had on the schools and education and Christine was able to establish how the supplies we had sent during the outbreak had been used to support the Health Centre and assess what else we could do to help it continue to provide health care and develop. Richard Lane was able to spend time teaching lawn tennis to the children and, with Yvonne's support, the team were able to start rebuilding relationships with the Head Man and the local Association and to begin to identify future priorities for the community.

As a result of that renewed engagement and meetings and discussions with the Hastings Association in London we are now beginning a dialogue with the Development Committee in Hastings SL to agree priorities for support from future fundraising and secure sustainable improvements for the community. These discussions will it is hoped enable us to finalise and agree the Link Strategy 2016 - 2021 to aid the recovery from Ebola.

We will hear from both Roger and Christine later today about their experiences and their findings.

Management of the Link

Moving on to the events of 2015;

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 respectively.

Trustees Meetings

The Trustees also met on two occasions to work through the detail of and refine the draft strategy, review budget commitments and discuss further ideas for fundraising activities.

Partnership Activities with the Community of Hastings Sierra Leone

Exchange Visits:

Due to the Ebola outbreak no exchange visits were possible during 2015.

Lynn and Richard White held a BBQ in May as usual however to mark the occasion when SL teachers would normally have been here. A collection was made and donated to Link funds.

Health Centre:

A report in the Lancet Global Health on the impact of Ebola highlighted to us that it was now more important than ever before that in the aftermath of Ebola we should be helping the Hastings Health Centre. Efforts continued to assemble equipment and supplies for the Health Centre and a container was hired to store the material pending shipment. The container was eventually shipped to Sierra Leone in November and we are grateful to Hastings Self Storage and ABC Transport who provided the storage facilities and transport of the shipment to Rockel in London at discounted rates.

Letters to the President, Minister of Health etc. unfortunately failed to achieve any concessions regarding the import duty on the shipment and a further £1500 of funds were used to pay this.

The St Leonards Rotary Club fundraising for the electrical system continued throughout the year with a Quiz Night in February, an African evening attended by King Masco and a Murder Mystery Night in November. Solar power proved too problematical and unsustainable and a complete rewiring of the Health Centre and repair of the generator was completed at the end of the year as an alternative solution.

We will continue to support the development and improvement of the facilities at the Health Centre as one of our core priorities and Christine will update us further during her presentation later today.

Our thanks must go to the Eric and everyone at the St Leonard's Rotary Club for their hard work.

Our thanks must also go to Christine and the rest of the Health Sub-Committee for their determined efforts.

Waste and Recycling

Without any visits to Hastings SL during 2015 no progress has been made with the waste and recycling projects. We understand two of the units are still operating at houses in the village. Contact with the Technical Institute where the technology was to be integrated into their alternative energy curriculum had been lost but only recently we have received a message from Mohamed Kamara at the Technical Institute which we will be following up.

Schools

Maintaining links with the schools in SL has been a real challenge for Roger and his team of teachers and pressures on teachers and schools in the UK have added to this challenge. Roger will be providing an update on the current situation later today.

Our thanks must go to Roger and the team for their continued efforts to maintain the links between the schools and to rebuild them now visits are possible once again.

Fund Raising

Fundraising efforts continued at a pace during 2015. Work to raise the profile of the Link through increased press coverage and the Facebook site continued and we were able to revamp the Links website to give it a more modern look and make it more intuitive and easier to navigate. Our thanks must go to Steph for his time and efforts on this. I am sure anybody who has visited the new website will agree it is a vast improvement.

There remains however a concern that we have not gained greatly in committed membership as a consequence and we need to continue to develop ways of marketing the Link, presenting it in a professional manner 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.

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

- Over the Christmas period 2014 and into 2015 the 'orange quiz sheets' designed by Robin Gray and Nola McSweeney proved extremely popular once again and raised £1,000.

- The traditional annual quiz night masterminded by the same team was held in March at the William Parker School. It proved extremely popular attracting 33 teams and raised £1,600.
- In September we held a Music quiz which proved extremely popular and raised over £550.
- A hugely successful Charity Ball was held in October at the Montgomery Suite at Banatynes Hotel with guest appearances by Lianne Carol and the Kites and raised over £2,500.
- Schools have continued to undertake a variety of fund-raising efforts, including Robertsbridge College where students raised over £700 for the Ebola fund.
- We have also received generous donations from fundraising by the local community including another 'Cheese Fest' at the Department of Transport offices and from several donors who wish to remain anonymous.

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 in February 2015.

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

2015 has been another extremely challenging and worrying year as we watched the tragic events that unfolded in Sierra Leone and neighbouring Guinea and Liberia. These events made us even more determined to raise funds and maintain 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 over there is a real risk that the focus of international aid agencies will be diverted to other crises. This will make our efforts to help our friends in Hastings SL recover.

We need to ensure that every penny we raise is put to good use and has a maximum and sustained impact. We are at last actively engaging with the head Man and the local committee members. 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. Once we understand their priorities and they understand the need for projects to sustain themselves once established, I am sure we will be able to achieve a lot more.

Once we receive feedback from the Head Man and the Committee we will be able to finalise the strategy and target our fundraising campaigns to specific projects.

Finally I must offer my personal thanks and those of everyone involved to Ray for his sterling efforts as Treasurer over the past 7 years. He has decided it is time to refocus his energies though he has promised he will still be appearing at various events throughout the year.

We are fortunate to have found a new treasurer, Martin Copland, and I would welcome him.

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

Richard Homewood 2015
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