

**Chairperson’s Annual Report 2021**

**Introduction**

As we boarded the plane in February 2020 buzzing with enthusiasm and excitement about our plans for the visit to Sierra Leone, none of us could have foreseen what the next eighteen months would bring.

There were 23 of us, the largest group ever to have travelled, 19 teachers and four Link members all had ambitious plans for the trip and with the help of the British Council the visit was a huge success.

Perhaps we should have realised things might change when we had to wait on the tarmac at Lungi Airport, sanitise our hands, have our temperature taken and be interviewed by medical staff before being allowed through the terminal.

After the usual chaotic journey to the Hotel, arriving in the midst of wedding reception the team settled in for a challenging but exciting experience of a lifetime.

My Colleagues will be reporting in detail on the projects that we worked on whilst there and those we continue to work on. Suffice it to say the visit was crammed with work and a little play.

I worked on the Schools sanitation project, whilst the teachers worked with partner schools on global citizenship and launched the Zero Waste Project. Mandy Hinxman organised an International Pupil Council meeting and we held a Community Celebration at the Twin Town Centre.

David Lewis worked with Isabel on the Seeds project (funded by the Battle Horticultural Society. David also built up contacts with Mohamed Success Kamara at the Hastings Community Learning Centre and the Hastings Gardeners’ Association.

Christine focussed her efforts on the Health Centre and I worked with her to resolve some issues with the water supply and the entrance gates. The centre was in dire need of an extension to the TB and HIV Unit and for a proper Triage and Isolation Unit. Having surveyed the Health Centre plans were drawn up on our return.

We met with the Head Man at a party kindly organised by Yvonne in order to try to build a better relationship with him and we remain hopeful that relationships will improve over time.

Returning to England with lots of work to follow up we walked headlong into Covid-19 and within two weeks the first lockdown.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has had a huge impact on the Link along with almost every other charity in the country. Fundraising has inevitably been hit hard and a number of the projects have faltered or been delayed as a consequence.

We have struggled to hold our traditional fundraising events such as the quizzes and wine tasting evenings. My fellow trustees put their thinking caps on and ran an on-line auction which raised almost £1200.

We are grateful for the generous dontations we have received from the Church of the Good Shepherd, St Helen’s Church, Kiley’s Karpets, Hermes Technologie and other donors.

In spite of theCovid -19 restrictions we have been able to progress several projects.

We were able to give the go-ahead for the extension to the TB and HIV Unit at the Health Centre.

We were able to launch the School Farms Project, with a dedicated project team and 25 schools participating, more later.

The Zero waste project continues and some schools have managed to maintain communication with their partner schools and continue with their work.

After getting off to a good start the Schools Sanitation Project has been delayed but we hope to start work on it again in the near future.

With the Covid -19 pandemic as well as other infectious disease in Sierra Leone our minds focused on the Health Centre and it was recognized that preventing the spread of infections was paramount. The Trustees therefore resolved to invest in the new Triage and Isolation Unit in spite of its significant cost. Work began in August and is well underway. Funds have just been released for phase 2 of the work.

The Sierra Leone Hastings Association UK has also taken on the task of making better use of the Twin Town Centre. They held a Hastings Jamboree event to raise funds for the Twin Town Centre and are working with their colleagues in the Sierra Leone Hastings Association SL.

**Governance of the Link**

**Committee Meetings**

With the lock down organising meetings proved difficult, and no General meetings have been held.

We launched the Newsletters to try to keep members informed of ongoing activity and raise the profile of the Link during these difficult times.

**Trustees Meetings**

The Trustees have managed to meet on several occasions using Zoom in order to keep business going and this proved successful.

**In Conclusion**

2020 /2021 has been extremely challenging but we have continued to drive forward with some of our projects. 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.

As we hopefully start to return to some form of normality we will need to increase our fundraising efforts and try to raise the profile of the Friendship Link both locally and further afield.

We need to ensure that every penny we raise is put to good use and has a maximum and sustained impact. We must maintain the dialogue with the head Man and the local committee members and work toward a better understanding of the priorities and how we can develop sustainable solutions for the future.

I cannot close without thanking those who have helped make all of this happen.

I have to thank Yvonne and Yvette and all of the members of the Sierra Leone community and the diaspora for their support and help during our visits to SL and our other work. Without this support the visits would never be as successful.

I must thank Robin for his continued hard work as honorary secretary, which has proved even more challenging and extremely frustrating during the Covid lockdowns

I thank Isabel and Roger for their work with the schools, Christine and Richard for their work with the Health Centre, David for his work on creating Livelihoods and the School Farms Project, Derek for his engineering expertise and advice, and Martin for his financial acumen and Lynn for her support for fundraising events and of course the catering today!

I also thank all of my friends and colleagues and members of the Friendship Link here, 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 and I thank them all.

Richard Homewood,

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