

THE FIFTIETH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE SOHO SOCIETY

held on
Friday, 12 May 2023

1 Introduction:

Chair, Tim Lord [TL] introduced the meeting, with a significant proportion of the Executive present, the chairs of the two main committees, licensing, Marina Tempia (MT), and planning, Andrew Murray (AM). Also present were our Treasurer, Takashi O'Rourke (TOR) present, our ward councillors (who have agreed to answer questions). Apologies have been received from Jason Fisher-Jones and Matthew Bennett.

TL explained, "Every year we have to have an annual general meeting, which enables you to see what we have been doing in the Soho Society. There is a formal requirement whereby one-third of the exec retire and get reappointed. Currently there are 13 directors, there is room for two more. If anyone wants to be considered as an exec member, you should speak to another member. We are also always keen to have new volunteers. The only real requirement is to attend exec meetings once a month. At the back of the room are last year's minutes, but if you have comments please raise them. If not, I will proceed."

TL outlined the process of the meeting, and then gave the key things from 2022 as follows:

- (i) There was a change of control in Westminster City Council. That has started a process of serious changes on planning and licensing, which may have a significant impact on Soho. The Soho Society, the Marylebone Association and Fitzrovia Neighbourhood Association organised a hustings before the election. The immediate impact of the change of control was that the council abandoned plans to make the al fresco scheme permanent, also abandoned the Vision for Soho proposal.
- (ii) There was a noise survey and had public meetings in autumn 2022 - information on the Society's website.
- (iii) There was a long campaign to protect and preserve 20th Century House in Soho Square. The application to demolish has been withdrawn by Royal London, though it is unclear what will happen to the building.
- (iv) The Society heard I Camisa & Son may be about to close, ran a press campaign, and worked with ward councillors and Shaftesbury, and it was saved for the next two years.
- (v) There was reference to a planning application by Hines re Dean Street running through to Soho Square. If approved we would lose Tesco Street, Dean Street, and the art deco building at 7 Soho Square.
- (vi) The council is currently tendering for a 12 month contract for work to be done on monitoring traffic, air quality and noise, which will provide valuable information for cumulative, licensing and other decisions.
- (vii) We are looking with the council at their Report-It system, and hope that will improve.
- (viii) Regent Street was mentioned, and the temporary changes will remain in place until 2025. There will be a wider consultation.
- (ix) Also concern was raised about licensing committees' decisions.

(x) Oxford Street proposals had also been discussed with the council.

(xi) There was reference to the fete, the radio show, the Clarion, and TL thanked the exec and volunteers for their hard work.

2 **Treasurer's report and accounts for the year ended 31 December 2021 - Takashi O'Rourke**

Takashi O'Rourke (TOR), Treasurer of the Soho Society, introduced himself and spoke to the report as follows:

(i) We had a surplus of £14,459 for the year ending 2022. In 2021 we had a deficit of over £5,000, because we had a lot of expenditure relating to the commissioning of environmental reports, and so on. That was a reason we had a surplus.

(ii) Our income for the Society comes mainly from memberships, the fete, Westminster City Council ward budget, and advertising in the Clarion.

Income from membership was £7,405 - this is above the budgeted £6,500, so thanks to Lucy Haine for driving that.

The fete, the biggest fund raising event, was also successful, again thanks to LH for driving that. It raised just over £23,000 in net income. That is thanks to donations and ward funding from WCC, Shaftesbury Plc, Crown Estates, Galliard Homes, the Rotary Club, Yamaha, Broadwick Soho, Soho House, Soho Housing Association and the Co-op, so our huge thanks to our generous donors, who support us year after year. Due to cost of living, our costs have increased. They were offset by suppliers agreeing to hire equipment at no fee or a reduced fee, so thanks for their generosity. However, moving forward to 2023, those suppliers are probably not going to be as generous, so that might affect this year's income.

Moving on to the Clarion, last year we published three issues, and income from that was just over £5,600. Again printing costs have increased and will go up again this year, but everything is going up.

Finally, the cash balance at the end of December was just over £46,000, including the £9,144 that is ring-fenced, but not technically unrestricted. Our cash flow is steady, we are in a stable financial position, despite rising costs.

If anyone would like a copy of the financial statement, email admin@thesohosociety.org.uk.

TOR thanked Niall O'Driscoll, our accountant, the independent examiner putting all the accounts together for us which will be filed before the due date.

TOR also thanked the volunteers for their assistance in raising funds. [Applause]

3 **Planning Report - Andrew Murray [AM]**

AM reminded the meeting that Soho is a unique area, referred to criticisms being unfounded, but reminded the meeting that Soho depends on a strong residential community, and said planning applications are looked at monthly. Objections include a range of issues - noise issues (such as openable shop fronts), changes of use, heritage issues (designs, inappropriate shop fronts). Pavement accessibility is an issue (mostly tables and chairs). AM referred to Ilona Rose House, the courtyard at the back, where there would be a lot of people in a concentrated space (with accommodation above). The Society objected to the scale of it, this was granted on a year's temporary licence to see what the outcome would be in terms of noise impact.

Pavement accessibility: e-bikes have been a big issue, and we would encourage the council to make space available off the pavement, if they are going to be part of the future.

Re BT phone boxes and the hubs they want to put in place - planning law does not help with common sense solutions.

Where residents raise issues, we try to support them. AM referred to a need for a review of some of the policies that have caused some of the damage in the area and said that it needs a commitment by the council to better enforcement, and we would certainly encourage that.

TL thanked AM for his hard work. [Applause]

4 **Licensing Report - Marina Tempia [MT]**

MT said if people were interested in joining the licensing committee, they should come to meetings (first Monday of the month at 5.15 pm).

In 2022 we had 91 applications in Soho (slightly down from previous year) which cover sex shop licences, renewals of SEVs, licences for gambling, and minor variations. The Society did not object to 60 applications (including five new restaurants within core hours). There were 31 representations, 16 of which were granted with or without changes to conditions; nine applications were withdrawn (possibly in part due to residents objecting) before they went to a hearing. There were two licence reviews - Manette Café, where the licence was revoked, also the Vanity (Gentlemen's Club), Carlisle Street, where additional conditions were added, and the SEV licence review is coming up at the end of May.

It is important to understand the new licences in the area: 12 licences in premises in previously unlicensed premises, so loss of retail, or a change from a café - an area that needs to be taken up with the council moving forward, and looking to how we can preserve the amenity of shops. This will add to the cumulative impact, last year another 882 people in the area. There was one new private members' club at 1 Warwick Street, with a 1 am licence, 180 covers, outside core hours.

In 2023 we have seen the busiest first four months of the year, so Soho is very much "open for business". We have had 50 applications so far, compared with 91 for the whole of last year. We have made 25 representations so far this year (as compared to 31 for last year).

MT referred to the sleep survey conducted in October 2022, the results of which can be found on the Soho Society website.

MT also referred to the need for residents to object to applications which they feel may impact them, and to attend hearings where possible, as this carries more weight with licensing committees. We can also support residents and refer you to Richard Brown, who supports the Society and residents in Westminster. He is part of the licensing project at the Citizens Advice Bureau.

TL thanked Marina for her hard work. [Applause]

There were questions on licensing and planning reports. Wendy Hardcastle also expressed thanks to MT for her extensive work on licensing.

5 **Fete and Membership - Lucy Haine [LH]**

LH said that last year's fete was successful, and we are now heading for this year's fete on 16 July, 12 noon to 6 pm. A couple of things to note: a two times winner of the waiters' race from the Dean Street Townhouse, he's up and raring to go. Still recruiting stalls, volunteers, waiters and dogs, so please sign up. We have a jam-packed day - six hours of entertainment, Splat the Rat, waiters' race, snail racing, human fruit machine, tug of war, all the old favourites, and lots more. It's all on the website. LH referred to and thanked the volunteers and the team.

Moving on to membership, there are new membership offers on our website. If you have a business in Soho and you would like to offer a discount, an offer to residents, or receive our newsletter, please get in touch and we can add you to the list. [Applause]

6 **Executive resignations and reappointments**

(i) Every year one-third of the exec resigns and gets re-appointed (if they want to re-stand): This year it is Lucy Haine, Jason Fisher-Jones, Joel Levack, Takashi O'Rourke and Jane Doyle. TL proposed that we re-elect those directors. Proposed and seconded.

(ii) We would like to re-appoint our accountants, who are present. Niall Driscoll was proposed and seconded.

(iii) TL raised one final resolution, to reflect the concerns of this group on the way in which council licensing decisions are made. MT and TL and others attend hearings and it does not seem to be working well. TL asked and proposed that, as the Soho Society and all its membership, we call on the council to properly apply its licensing policy. Resolution passed.

7 **Q and A:**

TL welcomed Patrick Lilley [PL], Paul Fisher [PF] and Jessica Toale [JT], West End Ward Councillors.

PL said that WE3 are proud to have been elected last year, and hoped the community have found them acting in good faith to represent interests. He mentioned a few hot topics that have been consistently raised - from Lime bikes to noise, to urination and street bad behaviour, and councillors have done their best to limit the ASB of badly parked bikes. They have been encouraging the use of anti-pee paint where possible, and objecting to inappropriate licence extensions.

JT said it is genuinely a pleasure to work with the Soho Society and residents, who care so much and do so much to preserve the character of the area. The council is proud of what has been achieved in their first year since election from, for example, free school meals and cost of living support, amongst others.

PF endorsed what has been said, and acknowledges that the Soho Society is going to be a "critical friend", and said they are pleased to work with the Society on licensing problems, etc, where there have been some successes. and he thanked the Society for the work put in.

There was a Q and A session, which dealt with, amongst other things, an audit around women and girls' safety at night, a phone consultation, and MT asked if we could be updated on the outcome of that work and whether it will be publicised? JT said she did not know the outcome of the audit, and said there had been extra funding from the Home Officer to support Night Stars, safe haven development around Soho, and engagement with businesses to ensure they have a night safety champion. JT said she would find out the results and report back.

The problem of parking of Lime bikes was raised, and there are going to be spaces allocated (200 to start with).

The question arose as to whether the Mayor of London had some responsibility. PL said he has a responsibility but no power, WCC has a responsibility and no power.

Tim Barnes [TB] said there is provision for the Mayor to act, because the agreement with the dockless bikes came through an agreement with the Mayor's Office, and there is a contractual

obligation for him to manage that without the need for bye-laws, so the Mayor does have the ability to change the terms as part of the annual renewal. Parking would be through residents' bays, and TB asked if there would be a consultation for Soho residents as to which residents' parking bays will be removed in the same way that there was for some of the charging points? PL said he did not know the answer, but there would be engagement rather than a formal consultation.

LH suggested that, as Conways had been enabled to create vast acres of pavements, that might be somewhere to park the bikes. She also raised the question of whether the car parks could be used, and spaces paid for by the operators. PL said that it was dangerous for cyclists to ride in car parks.

There were questions on anti-pee paint.

There were also questions re monitoring of noise, traffic and air quality across Soho. This should have been commenced months ago, the delay was to allow smaller companies to pitch for a WCC contract. The brief has gone out to a number of companies, and it is hoped that this will start soon.

David Gleeson [DG] said that he had spent 10 years as chair of licensing group, and wondered what chance there is of making WCC follow their licensing policy. PF said there has been a large increase in licences (30% over 20 years), which generate crime, noise and ASB, and cumulative impact. There needs to be consistency in granting licences. PF also said that WE3 have campaigned to get sub-committee members out on a Friday night / Saturday morning, so that they understand what is happening in the areas of Greek / Frith / Dean Streets.

WH said that she thought we are close to reaching saturation. PF said he thought we had reached saturation, but licences need to be considered on a case by case basis.

JD asked about enforcement. PF said more enforcement was necessary and council needs to work with other agencies (police, the licensing department, etc), and PF said if breaches are known to have occurred to email councillors (this can be done anonymously). PL said report-it is being updated and there has been a study into user experience.

The question of licence holders' responsibilities was raised, and in particular upkeep of air conditioning. PF said these things were being looked into. PF also said to get in touch with councillors direct with complaints and they will do their best to ensure complaints are taken forward anonymously.

TL closed the meeting, thanking those present for their attendance. [Applause]

There was then a film shown in memory of Leslie Hardcastle, who did so much for the Soho Society and the Soho community. [Applause]
