

TNRA CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2021-2022

Covid-19, TNRA members and the Committee

Although the Covid virus is still with us - and will probably continue to be so for ever – life has begun to return to normal. A matter of huge relief was our ability to recommence face-to-face Committee meetings in March 2021 after having had to hold them via Zoom for all of the previous year. Albeit during the long period of lockdown we managed to keep well on top of key issues, to pursue requests from our members for action and advice and to maintain good contact by email and phone with the Knight Frank estate office, handling all such matters have been hugely eased by the gradual lifting of restrictions.

It should be noted that medical-social-political opinion continues to be significantly divided on how best to deal with the risks involved. The same also applies in the case of individuals. In this respect Meera Rajan decided to resign from the Committee in March because of her strong conviction that TNRA - and the Chair in particular - had failed to take a lead in recognising the need to adequately protect the interests of those with severely diminished immunity like her. We will continue to monitor the situation and take appropriate precautions to safeguard everyone, especially for those attending all TNRA indoor events. In the meantime we much regret though well understand Meera's decision – and at the same time we warmly thank her for all her work while a Committee member.

Two other members have also left the Committee during the course of the year. Penny Hinxes resigned following her appointment by Knight Frank as the gardening contractor for the estate (see Gardens below), and following her move to York in February Tanja Jost also resigned. Nevertheless we are delighted that Tanja continues to manage the TNRA Facebook group. We also warmly thank both of them for all that they have contributed – and also continue to contribute as non-Committee members.

Knight Frank estate office

Despite the many challenges posed by remote working during various periods of lockdown and other measures required by the government to avoid risk Louie-Mae Gibson and her team managed to maintain a good level of service. Louie-Mae is certainly not to everyone's taste, she and her staff make mistakes or get things wrong from time to time, but in general her energy and commitment allied to the introduction of new staff, new systems and new procedures has resulted in far better service levels for most people than were ever provided by any of the previous regimes.

Estate management issues

Assured Shorthold Tenancies (ASTs)

Rent and rent review issues continue to exercise many residents in Merrick Square and now, increasingly, those living elsewhere on the estate. A year ago and more we were told that proposed swingeing increases for five households in Merrick Square related to anomalies. However, over the course of the last six months we have been contacted by sixteen non-Merrick Square residents who have been presented with in most cases rent increases of 9.9%. Of even more concern has been the case of some tenants arriving in 2021 who have been told, just ten months later, that the current market rate for their properties is now up to 20% more than it was when they commenced their tenancies.

For these and all other members who contact us we have provided advice on ways to push back which in some cases have resulted in a reduction of the initial proposal. In the meantime our AST Sub-Committee (Simon Webster, Ali Walker, John Moore and Ed Heckels) has continued to research, discuss and pursue rent and contract issues, and along with the matters mentioned above has focused on the following key issues:

- The size of such increases and the way in which they have been announced has been both unexpected and distressing. It also looks as though some tenants have been enticed in with an attractive rent only to be hit with a big increase later on. All in all these elements make for bad PR for Trinity House and Knight Frank.
- Tenants push back, resulting in more work for Knight Frank in negotiating and in sending in appraisers etc.

- It may also lead to tenants leaving early, thereby resulting in increased turnover, voids and the need for Knight Frank to find and vet new tenants.
- There is a lack of clarity concerning how market rates are assessed and justified. The actual condition of properties and the size of individual rooms can also vary considerably between seemingly identical properties: it is not clear whether such factors are always taken into account.
- Security of tenure is essential, especially for family tenants in Merrick Square and elsewhere whose continuing presence on the estate contributes so much to the special 'feel,' the stability and the well-being of all who live in Trinity Village.
- If AST contracts clearly set out from the outset the rents to apply in the second and third year of each tenancy this will remove a large element of uncertainty.

These and other matters were discussed with Martin Atherton of Trinity House and Louie-Mae Gibson of Knight Frank during our 5 April Committee meeting - see below.

Property repairs, maintenance and service levels

Though the second Service Quality Survey we carried out in late November 2020 revealed a mixed bag of responses, nevertheless the overall view of those who responded appeared to be generally positive. In retrospect it could have been useful to repeat the exercise in November 2021. However, it remains true that only a very small number of complaints have been drawn to our attention over the last year. This continues to compare favourably with the situation prior to late 2019 when members were contacting us every week (and at times almost every day) to seek our advice and help in resolving their issues.

Three particular issues have, however, been of concern for the Committee:

- A lack of clarity concerning the existence or not of an annual rolling Preventive Property Maintenance (PPM) programme – of the type in place during Capita's tenure - to handle exterior repairs and to avoid the ad hoc and sudden erection of scaffolding.
- The need for Trinity House to be more diligent in preserving the architectural and heritage features of its properties – a matter that was notably not taken into account when 20 Merrick Square was stripped of its important fittings and modernised in a most insensitive fashion in the summer of 2021.
- A similar need for Trinity House to improve its properties, particularly bearing in mind the need to pay due respect to important environmental and energy issues.

These matters were also discussed with Trinity House and Knight Frank during the 5 April Committee meeting – see below.

Meeting with Trinity House and Knight Frank

The following summarises key matters arising during our meeting:

AST contracts

- Martin Atherton noted that the Charity has no wish to be saddled with the reputation of being a poor landlord; he well recognises the benefits that derive from maintaining and encouraging a thriving community within Trinity Village; no plans or intentions exist whereby potential tenants are or will be lured into taking up a tenancy on the basis of an artificially depressed initial rent. Nevertheless he has a fiduciary duty to optimise income - concerning which some members of his executive take a hard line approach by pressing him to maximise income. In short, he has to balance significantly differing views and needs.
- The current contract – which had done away with the previous 3%-5% collar and cap clause – had come about at TNRA's specific request.
- Simon Webster noted that the cap-and-collar lease TNRA had objected to had been one that had been introduced by Knight Frank probably just before L-MG had joined the company. The previous, older lease had worked for residents and for Trinity House for many years. It was not just the content of the old lease that had changed but also the way in which rent increases were implemented that had become a matter of concern.

- Ed Heckels said that in retrospect the introduction of the new terms had been a clear mistake on TNRA's part, its approach at that time being based on a period during which inflation had been minimal for many years: circumstances have now significantly changed.
- During these and related exchanges Martin Atherton said that in principle he was prepared to re-visit and re-examine the basis of AST contracts in the light of recent changes in economic circumstances, including consideration of the use of appropriate indices such as CPI/CPIH in place of RPI. If some sort of hybrid rent metric could be found that recognises inflation as well as the market and so meets the Charity's need to optimise income whilst providing some sort of clarity concerning future rent increases for tenants (thereby also encouraging a greater sense of security), then these elements combined can continue to protect the special sense of character and community that exists in Trinity Village.

TNRA intends to request a follow-up meeting as soon as possible to pursue a resolution to our members' concerns.

Property management, preservation and restoration work

- As a result of the volume of required work Knight Frank has concentrated on the communal areas - where upgrading/decorating has been completed or will be completed within a two year period; and external areas - where works commenced c. December 2020, prioritising urgently required action. This latter programme will take three years to complete.
- Knight Frank recognises the need to introduce a rolling PPM programme: this will be implemented in due course.
- In the meantime Knight Frank will provide residents with provisional work plans to give them some form of advance notification of scheduled works and the erection of scaffolding.
- Martin Atherton noted that mistakes had been made and lessons learned regarding the need to preserve important heritage features and fittings. The repair and redecoration of 39 Trinity Church Square will therefore be carried out with the involvement of appropriate architectural consultants and other experts.
- Ali Walker suggested that consideration should be given to refitting shutters to the front windows of those properties where they had been removed, thus restoring the properties concerned to their original appearance as well as improving sound and heat insulation.
- Knight Frank also noted her proposal that care should be taken to ensure uniformity of design, appearance and materials when fitting or replacing door furniture and fittings.
- Knight Frank will maintain close liaison with TNRA in the pursuit of environmentally friendly initiatives and policies, regarding which Martin Atherton noted that he is now obliged to formally report on such matters each quarter.

Long leasehold - Mainstay (for all but Trilogy residents)

Following a November meeting attended by Trinity House's Martin Atherton, Knight Frank's Louie-Mae Gibson and her line manager Peter Devere-Catt, Tim Horsler and Mainstay's John James a set of key performance indicators was established with the aim of monitoring and improving Mainstay's service performance for the c. 50 apartments concerned over the period January-June 2022. This will be followed by a formal mid-year review in July. So far John James's/Mainstay's performance has progressed in the right direction.

In the meantime a long-running issue concerning inadequate, hugely expensive and unnecessary works carried out over a period of six years on the roof of 18 Trinity Street prior to the appointment of John James remains to be further pursued and resolved.

Long leasehold properties – Knight Frank (for Trilogy residents only)

Tim Horsler made a formal complaint to Peter Devere-Catt in February 2022 concerning the totally inadequate service provided by Knight Frank since their takeover of responsibilities from the developer's agents in October 2021. Peter Devere-Catt immediately accepted that Knight Frank had failed to perform. A formal meeting with him, Sophie Leefe the Property Manager concerned, Raff Manfellotto, Jane Salveson and Tim Horsler then

took place on 13 April, as a result of which key issues were addressed and appropriate key performance indicators were agreed. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating...

It should be noted that the 27 Trilogy long leasehold apartments concerned are not managed by Louie-Mae Gibson and the Trinity Street estate office but by a separate off-site Knight Frank team. 23 ASTs and 14 Housing Association residences complete the 64 individual properties comprising the complete Trilogy block.

NB Tim Horsler takes the lead in key discussions with Mainstay, Knight Frank and Trinity House.

Gardens

Former Committee member Penny Hinves was appointed as Knight Frank's gardening contractor during the course of the year. This has enabled her to begin to build in earnest on the good work she had already been providing in her previous advisory role for the company employed to do the job prior to her appointment. Aided by a much improved budget her appointment has enabled her to make excellent and evident progress in improving the design, planting, maintenance and overall appearance of the gardens in the two squares, in Gloucester Court and elsewhere. As well as doing similar work for long leasehold gardens managed by Mainstay (e.g. in front of and behind Shaftesbury House) it is now almost certain that Penny will be awarded the contract to look after the roof garden and the gardens in Trio Place, all part of the new Trilogy block in Swan Street/Harper Road managed by Knight Frank. All in all this will help to ensure a coherent and consistent approach to garden design and planting throughout the estate.

Penny also provides advice and help for the volunteer Roebuck Action Group (the RAG) which continues its good work in looking after the plants and shrubs on the piazza alongside the Roebuck pub. It is gratifying to report that the RAG has recently been awarded a new Council grant to fund the purchase of two additional large steel planters. These will be appropriately sited alongside those installed on the piazza a year ago, also funded by a successful RAG grant application.

Planning applications and developments

Committee Vice-Chair Ed Heckels continues to monitor and report on our submissions and representations to the Council concerning planning proposals. Currently we await news of the likely start date for the development of the Falmouth Road surgery site, regarding which TNRA responded positively when assessing the relevant planning application. In complete contrast, however, we remain highly critical of the proposed plans for the so-called King's Place site on the corner of Borough High Street and Harper Road. We have also submitted strong and well reasoned objections to Berkeley Homes' plans for a high multi-storey block they wish to build on the large Borough Triangle site that lies between Newington Causeway and Borough Road. In the meantime, however, everyone is delighted with the radical improvements made to the nearby Dickens Fields Park.

Grant applications

We continue to monitor all information concerning the possible provision of funds for improvements to the built environment. In the meantime the cycle rack for which we won a Council grant was finally installed in Falmouth Road in the late summer of 2021.

Green and environmental issues

The Chair has for some time wished to actively pursue such matters with the Council (who have recently announced a series of initiatives to minimise energy consumption and to protect the environment) and others. As yet, however, he has lacked sufficient time to do so. However, one of our members has recently volunteered to help TNRA in this task. In addition the recent meeting with Trinity House and Knight Frank (see above) also suggests that TNRA can work with them to pursue mutually beneficial initiatives e.g. improved insulation, more and better cycle storage facilities, the installation of EV charging points, the replacement of gas cooking and heating systems, and so on.

Refuse collection and street cleaning

Ed Heckels continues to maintain close contact with the Council's cleaning team to ensure that household waste, leaf-fall and refuse left by fly-tippers is collected and removed speedily. He also liaises with the estate office on all such matters.

Community safety

Committee member Shaun Stern monitors and takes action concerning incidents of crime, noise, anti-social behaviour and other similar issues by means of regular attendance at meetings of the Chaucer Ward Safer Neighbourhood Panel and in meetings and correspondence with the local police. He also shares relevant information and pursues action with the Trinity Street estate office when appropriate.

Membership

Committee member Raff Manfellotto manages TNRA's members' database and subscription records. Our year end membership was 219 households, just short of our all time record of 223 in 2017/18. These households represent c. 450 individual members. TNRA's membership remains consistently over 200 as the following statistics show: 206 in 2020-21 (the Covid lockdown year); 211 in 2019/20; 210 in 2018/19; 223 in 2017/18; 206 in 2016/17; 216 in 2015/16; 204 in 2014/15 – and 139 in 2010/11.

Events

After more than a year with no events permitted or possible because of Covid restrictions we were finally able to recommence a programme of social events three months into our new year. In view of the large numbers who would otherwise have attended in close proximity in an indoor setting we decided with great regret that we should cancel the popular Christmas Drinks and Canapes evening that was scheduled to take place in the Merrick Square Rectory on 2 December. The following well attended events took place between July 2021 and March 2022:

- 22 July - Meet the Committee - Henry Wood Hall and Porch
- 21 August – Porch Sale – Henry Wood Hall
- 20 September – Annual Pub Quiz – the Roebuck
- 16 December- Christmas Carols – Trinity Church Square
- 1 March - Pancake Day Races – Merrick Square
- 16 March – Meet the Committee for Trilogy residents – the Roebuck
- 29 March – Wine Tasting – Henry Wood Hall

The following events are already planned to take place in May and June, with others to follow more or less once a month thereafter as in the past:

- 7 May – Porch Sale – Henry Wood Hall
- 2 June – Platinum Jubilee Drinks Party – Trinity Church Square
- 12 June – Open Gardens Square Weekend – Merrick Square and Trinity Church Square

Ed Heckels masterminds the organisation and running of all our events: we all owe him a big vote of thanks for the very significant time, energy and enthusiasm he brings to this task.

Filming

Shooting recommenced during the year, including in September three day's filming on a major production involving many extras, cars, lorries and street furniture, very significant set preparation and the equally time-consuming striking of the substantial, specially constructed sets. As all of this involved a significant disruption to the normal movement of people and vehicles through the estate we decided soon afterwards to request that the Council's Film Office should not permit any further projects until well into 2022. By mutual agreement filming will recommence with a single day's shoot in May. In all of this we hugely rely on the skill, experience and time that Committee member Ali Walker brings to the task of liaising and negotiating with the Film Office, location managers and others to minimise disruption.

Website

Considerable work has been carried out by ex-Committee member Meera Rajan to redesign the website to make it more user-friendly. We hope to be able to relaunch the new look website shortly with the help of a TNRA member who has kindly volunteered to provide assistance for us.

Finances

As we reported at last year's virtual AGM the decisions we took in March 2020 to avoid all expenditure except that which was necessary to fund our basic administration costs and to ensure that we provided a regular and efficient communication and information service served us well during the long periods of lockdown and abnormal conditions in 2020 which also continued into 2021.

Committee member Tania Clark (who took over as Treasurer from Penny Hinves following the latter's resignation) will report separately on TNRA's audited accounts for the YE March 2022. The following are a few highlights worth noting when comparing this year's figures with those for last year:

- Income increased hugely from £6,413 to £23,613 – essentially because of abnormally high filming income (only £1,750 in the YE 2021, £9,903 in YE 2020).
- Pop-up book sales increased from £1,244 to £1,911 – a clear sign that people continue to seek books to read when many other diversions are off limits, and another good reason to thank Lesley Exton for running this much appreciated stall.
- Expenses increased from £4,703 to £8,541 – of which £3,340 related to the resumption of events.
- Reserves increased significantly from £23,878 to £38,501.

Discount scheme

Most of the firms who were participants before the Covid lockdown remain not only in business but also signed up to our scheme. Committee members Shaun Stern and Mary Jane Kane continue to approach shops, restaurants and outlets to propose that they should consider joining. Full details of all the concerns currently offering discounts to our members are posted on the TNRA notice board and can also always be found on our website.

Communication with members

We continue to keep our members abreast of current issues, developments, events and news by means of the TNRA website, bi-annual Newsletters, the Trinity Street noticeboard, flyers, posters, the TNRA Facebook site and monthly e-Letters. For much of this activity we have to warmly thank Committee member Lesley Exton whose contribution to the overall administration of TNRA and to the work of the Committee is exceptional.

TNRA also arranges occasional meetings to give new and potential members to learn about our activities and to discuss current issues and concerns.

Volunteers

We much appreciate those of our members who regularly offer their services to help us during our garden action days, bi-annual porch sales and social events. Setting up, manning and then clearing away after many such activities takes time, on occasion the need to beg/borrow transport and from time to time a bit of physical strength as well. Those who normally bear the brunt of such work (Committee members Lesley Exton, Ed Heckels and Tim Horsler) will always welcome more volunteers to help them.

Equipment for hire

Our hire service (run by Committee member Mary Jane Kane) continues to offer members a range of very useful equipment including gazebos, tables, chairs and glasses etc. – at very reasonable rates.

Tim Horsler, TNRA Chair

