

Chairman's report

This year has seen 50 years since our formation which was celebrated at our Summer Garden Party in September, with the Mayor and our Member of Parliament in attendance. Our Autumn newsletter also recorded some of the many achievements over the 50 years. It has been a tremendous success to keep the organisation in good health for this period. This has only been possible through the hard work of our trustees and the support of our members. Our thoughts now turn to the future.

During the past year, the Covid pandemic and climate change have been major factors in our lives and are in many ways interlinked. For instance, we have found ways of working and communicating remotely which has meant we have travelled less and spent more time at home. It has prompted some people to move further out, only coming into the city occasionally. It has also made us look more closely at our homes. Perhaps we have noticed the windows are draughty or we need more workspace or a larger garden or roof terrace. Outside the home, we have changed how we move around and are perhaps reluctant to use public transport. It might mean we walk and cycle more. Others might drive or take a taxi. We notice the climate changing. In July, we experienced a month of rainfall within an hour with consequent local flooding. Warmer weather has meant we can eat and drink outside, which has been encouraged by central Government and our Council. For many this is a pleasure but for others it's a nuisance.

All of these individual decisions or events impact on the planning system, which has to strike a balance between individual freedoms and the public good. The planning system has traditionally been slow to change, and the government decided that it needed to be streamlined and speeded not least to meet its targets for new homes. These proposals proved unpopular with some, particularly in the south-east where the need for new homes is greatest. So, the major changes have been paused and whatever comes forward is likely to be less radical with more emphasis on housebuilding in the midlands and the north. However, London and RBKC will still be under pressure to build more. Where to put these in our crowded borough is a challenge. There are effectively only two large opportunity sites in RBKC, one of them not far from here at Earls Court. We, along with The Kensington Society and others are concerned that the temptation will be to build ever taller. The new London Plan puts the responsibility for where to site tall buildings with local planning authorities. We will be watching with keen interest to see how this policy evolves.

Over the year, some very significant changes have been made in the area of use classes and permitted development. This has taken away much of the control formerly enjoyed by planners to decide what form our high streets should take. RBKC is trying to regain some control over these changes by implementing an article 4 Direction meaning that planning approval will be required. We support this move whilst having doubts that it will be allowed by Government.

Much of what ESSA does is help residents through the apparent maze of the planning system, whether they are looking to carry out some work themselves or are worried by something which will be happening next door. Where appropriate, we comment to the planners. Of the planning applications we have commented on this year, 80% have either been refused permission, withdrawn, or significantly revised. The other 20% are as yet undecided. This might seem a high success rate or you could say is unduly negative depending on your point of view. But remember, we only comment on applications we think are unsatisfactory. Our aim is not to stop things but to try and make sure they will not harm our area and if possible, even improve it. Sometimes developers are willing to engage with us before applications are submitted and we

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can feed in observations based on local knowledge and opinion which they may or may not take on board. We would like to see more of this early-stage engagement and perhaps include it as part of the pre-application process for major developments.

It has been a year of close engagement with the Council on proposed changes to the Local Plan and Supplementary Planning guidance. The SPD on Greening was published in June along with a useful Householders Guide.

The new Local Plan reached the Issues and Options stage in September and, along with many other local associations and The Kensington Society ESSA put a lot of effort into commenting on the 150-page consultation document. One of the biggest areas of interest was undoubtedly the section on green and blue issues including climate change and flood risk which we will be talking about in the panel discussion this evening.

Kensington High Street has continued to be a subject of debate and consultation, with some environmental improvements already implemented. The future of retail and how high streets respond is a national as well as a local issue. There are proposals in hand to create a Business Improvement District which if successful will give local businesses some powers over shaping the High Street and making it a more attractive destination. We are pleased to have been involved in the steering group.

Meanwhile, you can't fail to have noticed that many of the High Street buildings are being reconstructed and some are now emerging from their wrapping, for instance number 197 at the top of Allen Street and the Boots site on the corner of Wrights Lane. It is good to see this level of investment and confidence in the High Street's future.

Finally, I reported last year that the process of updating our Conservation Area planning guidance was underway, along with proposals to expand the area to include the mansion blocks such as Chatsworth and Marlborough Court. Although the process started well, it has since stalled due resourcing issues within the planning department. We hope that this is now going to be going to public consultation very soon.

As you can imagine, all of this activity has stretched our limited resources to the limit. We are a small group of trustees and helpers. Two of our longest serving trustees, Anthony Walker and Vanessa Gordon have decided to stand down this year and we thank them both for their wonderful service to ESSA. We need more people to get involved. I am delighted that three people have already come forward, namely Marc Guitart, Silvia Amoros and Paul Best and we look forward to working with them. But we need more. Whether it is contributing to the newsletter or the website, studying policy documents or commenting on planning applications, we need your help. We also need help managing the finances and keeping the membership informed and up to date. If you can help in any way, please let us know.

Thank you all for your ongoing support.

Barry Munday

Chairman