

LETCHWORTH EDUCATIONAL SETTLEMENT
229 Nevells Road, Letchworth Garden City, SG6 4UB
Registered Charity No 311085



MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2023

Tuesday 21 November 2023 at 7.30pm

Trustees (and Committee members) present:

Hilary Kemp (Chair), Marian Adams (Secretary), Alan Higbey (Treasurer), Stephen Charles (Vice Chair), Katherine Alcock, Marine Boulter, Nigel Carrick, Colin Connelly, Collette Hoefkens, Natalie Maguire, Nick Skinner (Manager and ex-officio)

Settlement Members present:

William Armitage, Pat Baskerville, Maureen Higbey, Jackie Gough, Diane Morrad

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

The meeting was confirmed quorate (ten Members of whom two must be trustees).

2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Val Aitken and David Walmsley.

3. Approval of minutes of the Annual General Meeting on 22 November 2022

The minutes were approved and signed by the Chair.

4. Matters arising not covered under other agenda items

There were no matters arising.

5. Chair's report

The Chair reported as follows:

“The academic year from September 2022 to the summer of 2023 was the first year of ‘normal operation’ since the pandemic. Class sizes were no longer restricted by the need to social distance, the timetable wasn’t disrupted by any form of lockdown, and there was increased demand for room hiring by clubs and societies. It was also a year in which the

manager Nick Skinner consolidated his team – hiring Carly Simmons in the autumn of 2022. Nick created a new structure and work schedule in which Julie and Carly assumed the roles of assistant managers, and as a result the office team has been able to support the expansion of the Settlement’s educational programme.

The first area of expansion was the introduction of the Summer School which ran across late July and August in 2022. We spoke about this at the 2022 AGM – but it wasn’t until later in the 2022/2023 academic year that we could see the full impact of those summer school sessions. The Summer School presented a varied series of one-off workshops and talks, available to non-members as well as members. There were several objectives of the Summer School – the first goal being to attract new people to the Settlement to sample our courses, which it did (we gained a number of new members through these taster workshops). The second goal was to introduce new tutors in a low-risk way – giving them the opportunity to experience teaching in our facilities, and for us to identify new subjects and tutors to add to our course programme. The third goal was to use the workshops and talks as a new marketing tool – through a printed leaflet that was distributed widely in order to raise awareness of the Settlement, and by promoting the follow-on courses in the Autumn or Spring terms to those people that attended the sessions. This first Summer School was a success – it had a very low cancellation rate, high average attendance (learners per class) and generated lots of positive feedback. On the back of this we decided that a week-long Easter School should be introduced, which took place in April 2023 and the Summer School ran again in July and early August of this year. Again, these were well attended, well received and helped to introduce more new tutors and members.

As you will see when you read the annual report, we have focused on capturing more data about our courses and capacity this year. By measuring how well used our rooms are – for educational activities, hiring and events – we can gauge how well we are utilising the site. The greater the use we make of our premises, the more income we can bring in. This is important for the financial health of the Settlement – I will let Alan our Treasurer speak to that topic in greater detail. Understanding how well we can fill our room capacity and where the demand exceeds the supply of courses we can accommodate is also vital for planning our future. It helps to guide our strategy, especially regarding the potential for growth in our most popular category of courses – the arts and crafts programme. The two rooms in the art block are working hard for us. We shared some early thinking about expansion plans for the site last year, and we have revisited those proposals several times during this year. We are now more confident that we can see the demand for courses that justifies expanding the arts and crafts facilities. And the architect on the Committee, Nigel Carrick, has devised a way to expand that creates the least disruption. It could also deliver a space to hold more exhibitions, and show off the wonderful work that is produced within our creative classes.

Exhibitions are popular and bring yet more new visitors to the Settlement. During the last 12 months we’ve hosted two new exhibiting groups. The first was St. Christopher’s School and their recycled fashion show (do you remember seeing the mannequins?). The second were the Herts Visual Artists – several of whom are now tutors teaching workshops and courses at the Settlement. In fact, our relationship with Herts Visual Arts extends to more than just being a host for artists’ Open Studios. Letchworth Settlement and Herts Visual Arts signed a partnership agreement in April 2023 which saw many mutual benefits – we were able to promote the Settlement to HVA’s county-wide membership, through their website and newsletters. We could also tap an exciting new base of skilled artists and craft people, and as a result have introduced new subjects and tutors into the 2023/4 programme more rapidly than we’ve been able to in the past.

Managing all this new activity has pushed our staff team and systems hard. To continue growing we've identified that we need a better customer database, one that allows the office staff and manager to work more efficiently. Over the last year we have specified the functionality we need, looked at potential systems, spoken to other local organisations that have made a similar change, and we have started the process of implementing a new database. It is another of the building blocks that we need to put in place to have a robust operation, and it is essential if we are to grow our programme of courses and our site in future years.

There is also another strand of activity over this past year, that I feel is worth mentioning. It has contributed financially and socially to the Settlement - it is the series of events that have taken place here. From the Christmas Fair to the fundraising quizzes, foreign film nights and other cultural events, it has been a busy year. Live music has featured more strongly too – with the Settlement hosting several music nights, including two nights of songs and dancing to the Beatles 60s sounds. But the most noteworthy events have been the Settlement Players centenary year productions – not only have there been more plays performed this year, with excellent audience figures – but there was also an award-winning play written by one of the Players, which featured the story of the Settlement and its precarious path through the pandemic. Seeing that performed and praised at the Cambridge Festival brought a little dampness to the eyes.

Whilst referring to the Players, I am sure I speak for everyone that it was with great sadness we learnt of the death of John Baskerville in September. He will be sadly missed.

We're proud of the success we've had this year with strengthening the educational offering, hiring and events. We must not become complacent though – with the cost of living making it difficult to secure growth in our income, and inflation especially in energy bills and increases in running costs, we need to keep a careful eye on the financial position of the Settlement.

I would like to end by recording our thanks to all those who support the Settlement and its activities. The staff; learners, tutors, hirers and other users of the Settlement's facilities; our members; volunteers and other supporters including organisations like the Heritage Foundation; our partners; and my fellow trustees. Without the commitment and support of all these people the Settlement would not be here, nor would we be actively planning for the future. Thank you."

6. Treasurer's report

The Treasurer reported as follows:

"The accounts for the year ended 31 July 2023 have been independently examined as required by the Charity Commission. There were no changes from the draft report and accounts made available on the Settlement's website. The report and accounts have now been signed and will be made available on the website shortly.

The accounts show a small surplus of £469. The surplus arises after an accounting adjustment of £17,181 for asset depreciation, which means our cash surplus was £17,600.

This is the first surplus made since 2015, except for the years ended 31 July 2020 and 2021, when our income was supported by the Save Our Settlement appeal and a number of Covid related and other grants. It is therefore something to celebrate, although there is

no room for complacency as our educational activities are still underpinned by our other income sources such as donations and fundraising events.

The Committee continues to look at ways to reduce our reliance on other income to support our educational activities. This has resulted in an increase in both course fees and hiring fees. We are also trying to keep a tight rein on expenditure where possible. By forward planning we were again able to cap our energy costs for the next year, but notwithstanding this they will still be higher than in previous years.

The Summer and Easter Schools have also proved a success and have allowed us to generate additional income.

We are planning to put on more fundraising events in the coming year to continue to increase additional income and also to take some of the financial pressure off of our learners and hirers as we recognise that the cost-of-living crisis is impacting all of the Settlement community – it is highly likely that course and hiring fees will need to increase again for the next academic year although we will try to keep any increases as low as possible. However, we do need your support to make our fundraising events a success. The Christmas Fayre and Raffle (both this coming Friday, 24 November) together with a number of other events in the New Year, will be a chance to support the Settlement, whilst enjoying an eclectic mix of musical events and a fun race night. Nick will ensure that you are kept abreast of forthcoming events so you can be sure to make a note in your diary.

The Settlement Players' talented team have just put on another excellent play ("The Game's Afoot" by Ken Ludwig) and it was encouraging to see that the show attracted a good audience, selling out on two of the three evenings. The Settlement benefits from a share in the profits of the Players' shows, as well as hiring income from them, so I urge you to provide similar support for their next plays in March and June 2024.

Our aim continues to be to reduce, and ultimately permanently eliminate, the level of the annual deficit. We are fortunate to have sufficient funds to give us breathing space to do this – these funds having been raised by way of various grants, the generous donations of Members and other supporters and the building up of reserves in the past.

We are lucky to have a small group of loyal and dedicated volunteers and supporters who will hopefully continue to support the Committee's efforts. We would welcome anyone who has any ideas for fundraising events, or better still is prepared to help to organise such events.

Feedback is important to us so we would be delighted to hear from you. We would also welcome anyone who would like to make a regular donation to the Settlement if they are unable to support our fundraising events.

The economic climate remains very difficult at present, so I do appreciate that this plea may not necessarily be welcome. I do, however, have to be open and honest with you as to the issues continuing to face the Settlement.

At the end of July 2023, the bank balance stood at £176,200 (last year £163,500) so there is no immediate cash flow concern. However, as I have just noted, we cannot rest on our laurels. Instead, we must maintain our efforts to ensure that the Settlement will still be here, and flourishing, at the end of this decade and beyond.

Information on the figures in the accounts is provided in the annual report but I am happy to answer any questions."

In response to a number of questions about the Settlement's financial position, the following points were noted:

- Some expenditure was unexpected. For example, the dishwasher had just broken down and needed to be replaced. There was also concern about the life expectancy of the boilers.
- The restricted fund for property improvements (disclosed in note 12 to the financial statements) dated back to 2008 when there had been some substantial building works undertaken. The fund was being depreciated annually. It was not therefore cash held for any future building work.
- It was felt that there could still be room to increase some hiring and course fees without losing learners or hirers (see also item 10 Questions from Members).
- The Treasurer prepared the Settlement's budget on a break even basis.

7. To receive the report and financial statements for the year ended 31 July 2023

The report and financial statements for the year ended 31 July 2023 had been approved by the Committee on 2 November 2023 subject to there being no changes to the financial statements which at the time were still being independently examined. The independent examiner signed off the financial statements, unchanged, on 15 November 2023.

The Members received the report and financial statements for the year ended 31 July 2023.

8. Appointment of independent examiner

Thanks were given to Roger McIntyre Brown for once again carrying out the independent examination of the financial statements. He received no remuneration for the examination and had saved the Settlement around £3,000.

Roger had confirmed that he would be happy to undertake the examination for the year ending 31 July 2024.

The Members approved the appointment of Roger as independent examiner for the year ending 31 July 2024.

9. Election of trustees

The following nominations had been received:

Name of Nominee	Proposer
Marian Adams*	Maureen Higbey
Katherine Alcock*	Ivan Phillips
Stephen Charles*	Jenn Pickstone-Groves
Colin Connelly**	Nigel Carrick
Collette Hoefkens**	Carly Simmons

*Retiring by rotation and standing for re-election

**Co-opted by the Committee during the year and standing for election

The nominations were read out and the election of trustees on bloc was unanimously approved, with no abstentions.

10. Questions from Members

Members raised a number of issues:

Increases in course fees

- Concern was expressed that another increase in course fees from September 2024 might be financially difficult for some learners.
- The Chair emphasised that the Committee spent a lot of time considering if fees should be increased, and if so, by how much. Unfortunately, income from courses was still not enough to cover all of the costs associated with providing them, including tutor fees and overheads. Some tutor fees had not increased for some time and they might need to do so in the near future.
- More short courses were now being provided as it was felt that these were both less of a financial and time commitment for learners.
- The Committee also looked at other organisations to make sure the Settlement was providing value for money.
- Looking to the future the Committee would be happy to consider incentives, for example, a discount for advance payment. However, it was not felt the time was right to do so at the moment: partly because the Settlement was only just getting back on a level basis following the difficulties caused by Covid, and partly due to practical issues as there would be an even greater administrative burden on the staff team until a new system to manage the Settlement's activities was in place.

Workshop and hiring fees

- It was felt that a further increase in hiring fees would not deter some groups from using the Settlement.
- Anecdotally it was also felt that workshops at the Settlement offered very good value for money compared to similar ones run elsewhere.

Who are the Settlement's competitors

- North Herts College provided more educational courses and courses leading to formal qualifications so was not felt to be a direct competitor.
- It was difficult to find a direct comparison, but the Rothsay Education Centre in Bedford was the closest, both in offer and demographics. The Settlement had developed a good working relationship with Rothsay to mutual benefit.
- Also some competitors could actually partner with the Settlement rather than compete against it.
- The tutor base covered a wider geographical area than the learner one. The Settlement provided opportunities for tutors to work further afield.
- Some competition came from online provision. For example, most of the courses offered by the Open University were now online.
- Part of the Settlement's appeal was the social aspect of learners attending courses in person.

Use of Common Room and catering

- It was suggested that the Common Room could be used more, for example, for a regular drop in morning.
- The catering provision was currently being discussed by the Committee. In order to find out what users wanted, it was proposing to carry out a survey in the Spring 2024 term before making any decisions.

- Some ideas suggested to promote the catering provision included menu cards on the tables in the Common Room, making refreshments available to parents/carers picking up children from the Dance School and keeping the hatch to the kitchen open so users were aware of the existence of the kitchen.

Business Plan

- The Chair noted that the Settlement's business plan should be completed in the next few months.
- Part of the work undertaken to develop the plan included looking at the Settlement's competitors and potential partners.
- Once the plan had been approved, it was planned to share it with Members.

11. Any Other Business

Message from Val Aitken

In her absence, Val had sent the following message:

"Please add my thanks to all staff & volunteers for their invaluable contribution to the continued good life of the Settlement. Thank you all, your efforts are much appreciated."

Message from David Walmsley

In his absence, David had sent the following message:

"I must express my appreciation for the work that the staff and Committee carry out."

The Members present also expressed their thanks to the exceptional staff team at the Settlement.

Spring term brochure

The Chair informed Members that the Spring term brochure would be available later in the week and it had also been published in the previous week's Comet. The decision had been made to produce termly rather than annual brochures to ensure course information was as up to date as possible. A different format was being trialled and feedback from Members would be very welcome.

12. Date of 2024 AGM

Confirmed as Tuesday 26 November 2024.

The Chair thanked everyone for coming to the AGM.

The AGM closed at 8.13pm.

These minutes were approved at the 2024 Annual General Meeting, and signed by the Chair, on 27 November 2024