

## **Earl's Court Square Garden Committee Budget & Garden Levy Meeting held via Zoom**

**At 7.30pm on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 2022**

### **1. Chairman's Report and Welcome**

Katrina Quinton, Honorary Chairman, then gave the following brief introduction and report for the year ended 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021

“Sadly we continue to be affected by Covid restrictions and hence this meeting is held by Zoom to approve the accounts for the last financial year and to agree the precept to be paid by those properties designated as Garden Ratepayers under the 1851 Kensington Improvement Act. RBKC ask the Sub-Committee for this information by the end of January each year.

A meeting will be held in the Spring, possibly in the garden itself, which will give Ratepayers a chance to meet and to discuss matters that relate to the management of the Garden, including funds held, future plans and voting for the Sub-Committee which manages the garden on behalf of the Garden Rate Payers. I apologise for the fact that we did not organise an EGM this year to discuss the matters raised at the end of last year's AGM in person.

The Pandemic continued to affect many events but we were thrilled to finally welcome Terrain Aeration Services to provide deep aeration for the lawn and also to line the ventilation holes created with dried seaweed fertiliser which should benefit the lawn. We continue to take on the pigeons and reseed and will have another go when the trees have been pruned this year as grass needs light to grow. Charles Wood Landscaping continue to look after the garden. Anna our gardener for several years has now set up her own business and so we now have Dan and Ned working in the garden on a regular basis and mostly in the afternoons in the spring and summer to provide a presence to remind children and their carers to respect the garden.

The thing I am most thrilled about this past year is the Earl's Court Square Gardening Club which is run by Harriet Worsley, a resident of the Square. The children are engaged and are getting to know the garden and plants and trees and learning how to cultivate and care for them.

The Residents' Association organised much appreciated community events for the unveiling of the Plaques and the Christmas Tree and I am delighted that there is such a strong community bond between residents and the Garden.

Approximately 60 Garden Rate Payers out of approximately 240 have not asked for a key to the Square. The subscriber keys are restricted to 75 in number and there is a waiting list of 21 at the moment – the first six people having been waiting since March 2021.

I did approach the Council's Planning Department regarding replacing the existing gates with taller ones to deter unwanted human visitors and was advised that the Council would not agree to a Planning request as they felt it would be out of keeping with the Square whether the design was a period replica or an extension of the existing gates. The north gate has been automated and there will be teething problems with this, and we ask for your patience and understanding. It is also hoped that the warping of the gate in the summer will not damage the mechanism.

We will get the water feature repaired. Finding replacement pumps and adaptors has been a challenge and as soon as the weather improves in the Spring we hope it can be running again.

As you will have noticed we did have to perform emergency tree surgery on a Plane on the west side of the square. It had Massaria and also fungal infections and the tree had to be rebalanced once the

diseased limbs had been removed. It did rally at the end of last year with new growth and I am confident it will come back this year and as the rest of the trees will be pruned will not look quite so out of place.

It is always a privilege when people give us plants for the garden to remember family and friends – not everyone wants a plaque and we are grateful. The forthcoming Jubilee will also give us an opportunity to plant something new and I feel it would be lovely if the Garden could be part of the Queen’s Green Canopy campaign and the venue for a community lunch over the Jubilee Bank Holiday weekend in June”

Katrina was then thanked for her welcome comments and the Chairman’s report.

## **2. Treasurer’s Report**

Tom Brown, Honorary Treasurer, then read out the following report and before asking those attending to vote on the precept.

“Routine expenditure on garden maintenance was broadly as budgeted in 2021 but expenditure on long-term assets was much less than the budget allowed and consequently year-end cash of £80,442 remained exceptionally high.

The budget for 2022 allows for routine expenditure to increase 15%, mainly because the triennial tree-pruning is due, and for all currently possible long-term projects to be completed. No increase in the Garden Levy nor the subscription rate of £190 for the 75 non-Garden Charge-payers in the arms of the Square is required, and year-end cash would still exceed £42,000, enough to cover all conceivable contingencies.

### **Review of 2020-21 Income & Expenditure**

The Garden Committee’s accounting year runs from 1 December to 30 November so for simplicity references to ‘2021’ and ‘2020’ cover periods running from December 2020 to November 2021 and the previous period December 2019 to November 2020.

#### **Income**

2020 was significantly impacted by COVID-19 in that expenditure dropped because the gardeners didn’t work as many hours as normally, a lawn revitalization project was deferred and we received far more income from issuing keys to Garden Subscribers than the long-term normal.

2021 showed a return to more normal patterns. Our income at £30,974 was still higher than budget, because we assumed 75 Garden Subscribers (the cap approved at the AGM) would renew their access but in fact only 72 did, so there was extra income from new subscribers, as well as a high number of keys issued to new Garden Charge payers. We also had a ‘windfall’ £500 fee for allowing use of the garden one morning for a fashion photo-shoot.

Interest received on our bank balances (median £76,272 through 2021) was almost negligible owing to near-zero interest rates (in real terms again negative). Overall income was 8% more than budgeted.

#### **Expenditure**

The number of hours worked by our gardeners, Moyses Stevens (Landscape & Gardens) Ltd – trading as Charles Wood Landscape Consultants – was slightly up on pre-pandemic 2019, with billing for garden labour of £22,500 back to normal. FYI their hourly rate charged is unchanged at £21 +

VAT. Planting, manure and feed was a record £8,170 as it included £2,400 for a deep lawn aeration treatment of dried seaweed by Terrain Aeration Services, as well as conventional top-soil and seeding, with the aim of improving the lawn after its very heavy use in 2020.

We had not anticipated more than minor incidental tree-care, but in the event discovery of masaria disease of plane in one tree necessitated urgent surgery to save the tree, meaning tree-care costs of £8,170. This included a climbing inspection of other trees, which fortunately confirmed their health.

Under nearly all other headings of expenditure you will note we spent less than the budget allowances, although in line with long-term patterns. Our water use fell significantly, because of wet weather requiring less use of the irrigation system, also accounting for lower electricity costs.

Events in the Square (£2,527 vs budget £3,330) are funded from non-garden levy monies and comprised as usual the Christmas Tree, the cost of which was increased owing to supplier issues, but towards which ECSRA still contributed £500 (included in Other Income), and the music and refreshments for the Summer Party.

Garden waste charges of £1,135 exceeded budget, caused by the volume of catch-up pruning and tidying, but we continue to try to hold these down by maximizing use of the low-cost RBKC Blue Bag collection service and increased use of our own composting bins.

Overall routine expenditure outstripped budget by 5% but this was offset by the better than budgeted income and a substantial underspend on Fixed Asset Expenditure.

The 2021 budget included £30,000 to allow for possible replacement of the garden gates and installation of security fanning either side of the gates. A pre-planning application was made to RBKC of the designs (shown briefly at the AGM for guidance), which was rejected. Consequently, we only expended £4,728, mostly representing the down-payment on automating the north gate, which we ascertained could be carried out without changing the existing gate. The work has been carried out by West London Security, the supplier of the existing key fob entrance system, and will cost £8,916 in total (the post completion payment of £4,458 is due in January 2022). As a result, the garden is now fully accessible for wheelchair users via the pavement ramps installed by the council in 2020 and the gate automation, which complies with all current accessibility and safety regulations and law.

Finally, we spent £1,706 on electrical work, approximately 50:50 on repairs by Kingston Electricals and two new powerful 'Hunza' LED uplights in the central flower beds, installed by MK Electrical London, who show promise to reduce our electrical repair costs in future.

Total expenditure overall of £50,280 was thus well below the budget £75,535 but nonetheless was still the second highest ever (2019 £58,352 was a year of tree-pruning). We thus did not reduce our cash balances by anything like the amount expected, with year-end cash of £80,442, down £19,306 from opening £99,748

### **Budget 2021-2 and Garden Charge 2022-3**

The background to this year's budget is ongoing social and economic disruption caused by Coronavirus, a return of consumer price inflation (currently expected around 5% pa in the UK) accompanied by negative real interest rates of around -4.5%pa. Increases in National Insurance Contributions and Council Tax are further expected to hit household incomes.

Consequently, the budget is based on 5% inflation in garden labour and insurance costs from 2021 actual. Planting, manure and feed are reduced to £6,000 from £8,170, because the exceptional lawn-

aeration and treatments will not recur in 2022, and use of commercial manure has been reduced by first-time use of a significant amount of our own home-made compost; this will still be £500 more than 2019. Treecare and pruning is increased to £10,000 to cover the triennial pruning, though actual costs will likely be lower than last time in 2019, as the MDP-affected south-west plane tree has been done already. The combined £16,000 is widely enough drawn to cover possible removal of the sickly photia near the shed and planting a mature new tree, such as a red chestnut or birch, in its place, though it is uncertain this will progress this winter. A slight reduction in commercial garden waste fees is also budgeted, as the compost bins have more capacity to take more of our garden waste in 2022.

We assume water consumption will revert to 2020's record level. The electricity budget is reduced because (a) we currently have a £120 credit balance with EDF (b) our present fixed tariff runs until October 2022, so the expected increase in tariffs won't impact us until 2023. The newly automated north gate will increase our power consumption, and we will monitor this during the year.

Other headings of routine expenditure are regularly underspent, so these are left unchanged.

Expenditure on fixed assets is generously increased from £6,464 to £15,000, which will cover the completion payment on the north gate automation and allows for the south gate to be similarly automated, if experience with the operation of the north gate is positive. The irrigation system is working well and the budget of £1,750 for electrical and irrigation systems will allow us to upgrade further LED lights and cover repairs.

The total budgeted expenditure for 2022 is a record £66,944 (previous highest in a tree-pruning year was £58,452 in 2019). Nonetheless, because we start the year with a still exceptional £80,458, there is no requirement to increase the Garden Charge from £12,500 or change the arrangements for Garden Subscribers, which are for 75 keyholders to renew at £190 each. On this basis, our cash will still be £42,253 at year-end.

Our Garden Levy was the lowest for any Kensington Garden in 2021 and we expect it to still be so in 2023. Looking ahead over the period 2023-5, assuming we continue to allow 75 Garden Subscribers to use the garden, the Garden Levy would directionally increase to £25,000 by 2024 and then increase in line with inflation"

***The Treasurer then asked the attendees to vote on the precept amount of £12,500. This was then agreed.***

Tom was thanked by all present for his work on the Treasurer's report

### ***3. EGM Meeting in the Spring.***

*The Chairman then outlined what she was hoping would be discussed at that meeting:*

- a) Voting on individual members of the Committee
- b) Queen's Platinum Jubilee Celebrations
- c) London Open Square Events with live music
- d) Musical Events
- e) What activities can be done in the square?
- f) Possibility of changing the Date of the Committee's Financial Year
- g) Other monetary discussions to be shared with all garden committee members.

She thanked all attendees for their participation and then formally closed the brief meeting at 8.15pm