

ESJCT Ltd Directors' Annual Report October 2016

It is with great pleasure that we write this, our second, Annual Report to all Members of Exeter St James Community Trust. Following the resignation of Di Boston, the Trust's first Chair, which she announced at the AGM last September, the Board appointed Robyn Connett as Chair and Harry Temple, Vice-Chair. Harry also took on the role of Director with responsibility to liaise with the Allotment Project Group, mirroring the role already undertaken by Robyn Connett regarding Queen's Crescent Garden. Recognising the need for an additional director to share the overall workload, Board members were delighted when Beth Osment agreed to be appointed. The Board has met bi-monthly throughout the year.

This year has seen a slow but continuing growth in membership with 229 now registered as Shareholder Members, the majority being individual residents of St James, but also local businesses and organisations as well as individuals and organisations from further afield, all wishing to support the community of St James. Despite the ward boundary changes this year, there is no change to the geographical area designated to benefit from the Trust's actions; this will always remain the neighbourhood within the former St James' Ward boundary.

Projects

Set up primarily as the body to take legal responsibility for projects brought forward by Exeter St James Forum, much of the Directors' work has focused on those which the Forum has formally requested the Trust considers. In addition to Queen's Crescent Garden (QCG) and an offshoot of the Forum's Allotments Project, St James Vegetable Gardens (SJVG), the Board has also agreed in principle to the Forum's Housing Group's request, to consider ownership or leaseholding of 3 Well Street, a retail unit housing the important heritage site of St Sidwell's Well, with or without two first floor 'town houses'. The Board will give very careful consideration to the formal business plan that the Housing Group has been invited to submit in due course.

St James Vegetable Gardens

This Society was formed by members of the Forum's Allotment Group to secure and develop plots for residents of St James on the long-established allotment site at St James Park Station. Unwilling to make individual agreements with each plothead, Network Rail had expressed a willingness to agree a single lease with an incorporated body, and so the Trust was approached to be leaseholder, with the day to day management undertaken by SJVG. To comply with the Trust's Objects, the Directors have insisted that the requirement for an annual Open Community Event be incorporated in SJVG's Constitution.

Progress has been frustratingly slow regarding the Lease. The Board has considered an initial Draft Lease provided by Network Rail, but this was clearly inappropriate. It is a matter of great frustration to both SJVG members and the Board that a more satisfactory Draft has not yet been forthcoming from Network Rail, but the Directors are ready and willing to seek the legal advice necessary before signing a Contract that is appropriately tailored to the Vegetable Gardens.

Queen's Crescent Garden

Progress has at last been made regarding the long-awaited Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) required before the Trust can take legal responsibility for Queen's Crescent Garden, through a long-term lease from the City Council. The CPO was advertised in June, with a deadline of 24 June for objections to

be raised with Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). According to the City Council, DCLG has not yet confirmed the Order, nor even advised whether any objectors came forward. However, the Directors are hopeful that it will not be much longer before the Lease can be agreed and signed. Keith Biggs, Planning Solicitor with OTB Eveling, who has already negotiated Heads of Terms with ECC, pro bono, has offered to draw up the lease and oversee the completion at a reduced and capped rate.

Once the Lease has been signed, the Trust will take over all responsibility for the project from Exeter St James Forum, which currently holds QCG funds.

Although currently the Forum's responsibility, the Trust has assumed responsibility where future implications are involved. Bids for two funding opportunities, unusual in not requiring applicants to be owners / leaseholders, were submitted this year: DCLG's Pocket Park Programme awarded a total of £13000 and W H Smith £500. Matchfunding was a requirement of the former and the Directors are grateful for donations in money and in kind from individuals and local businesses as well as Exeter Round Table, Exeter University and Devon County Council.

The Pocket Park Award resulted in a whirl of activity during February and March, with the first major signs of restoration attracting the attention of locals as well as people who passed through our busy roads, and bringing many positive comments.

It was very frustrating that the work had to come to a halt when the money ran out, but the Directors will be poised to submit further bids as soon as the Lease is signed, determined that the restoration of the walls should continue as quickly as possible!

Exeter Community Forum

The Board has appointed a Director as Trust representative on Exeter Community Forum, the body which will be responsible for allocating funds from the neighbourhood element of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to community projects across the City. Our representation on this Forum will ensure St James benefits from its fair share of funds available from this new pot which amounts to 15% of the overall CIL payable to the Council by developers.

About St James

Two further issues of About St James have been produced during the year, as a shared initiative with ESJF. Delivered free of charge to every house in St James, these attractively produced newsletters have been very well received. We would like to encourage Trust Members to send in photos and information for the consideration in the next Edition.

And finally...

The Directors are always keen to hear suggestions from Trust Members. Do get in touch if you have ideas that would make St James a better place to live and work. We can't take on all the work, but the Trust may be able to facilitate the work of such project groups.