

KEATS HOUSE CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

Friday, 13 October 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Keats House Consultative Committee held at Aldermens' Court, Guildhall on Friday, 13 October 2023 at 2.30 pm

Present

Members:

John Foley
John Griffiths
Jason Groves

Stephen Ainger
Steven Bobasch
Alexandra Lavery

In Attendance

Officers:

Rob Shakespeare	- Environment
Simon Glynn	- Environment
Jayne Moore	- Town Clerk's Department

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Munsur Ali, and the meeting was chaired by John Foley.

2. MEMBERS' DECLARATIONS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT IN RESPECT OF ITEMS ON THE AGENDA

There were no declarations.

3. MINUTES

On the website relating to Keats House (KH) referenced at item 3, a Member asked whether more content could be added. The Committee heard that further content was expecting to be added shortly, particularly on the story of the House. Further online content is being prioritised for the new collections online site, which will be launched in 2024/25 and linked to from the website of the City of London Corporation (CoLC).

On item 4 (specifically, the charities review recommendations for submission to the Culture Heritage and Libraries Committee [CHL]) the meeting noted that the CHL meeting of July 2023 had considered the Charities Review at item 17 of that meeting.

RESOLVED, That the minutes of the meeting of 23 June 2023 be approved as a correct record of the proceedings.

4. PROGRESS AT KEATS HOUSE APRIL - SEPTEMBER 2023

The Committee viewed a presentation on Keats House that included information on the various programmes and activities set out in the report submitted for item 5 (including Young Romantics in the City display running to

February 2024, as well as the Poetry vs Colonialism programme and the development and performances of the 'Mary Shelley' and 'Fanny Keats' actors). The Committee viewed visualisations of the boundary wall proposals as submitted to the London Borough of Camden.

5. **MID-YEAR UPDATE ON ACTIVITIES AT KEATS HOUSE**

The Committee received the report of the Interim Executive Director of Environment that provided Members with an update on activities at Keats House between April and September 2023.

Referencing section 6, the Committee noted, in response to a question, that staff shortages (due to illness) had resulted in the closure of Keats House for one day.

A Member asked whether any covid-related measures were in place in the event of any spread of covid, the meeting heard that KH was more resilient than it used to be (noting section 5 of the report on staffing coverage). The meeting noted that volunteer numbers are down since the pandemic.

The meeting heard that there was an expectation that Saturday openings would resume from April 2024 onwards, with a full recovery of visitor numbers expected by 2025. In response to a question on why KH was not currently open on Saturdays (in lieu of, for example, Wednesdays), the meeting heard that efficiency savings during and before the pandemic had resulted in some staff not being employed to cover Saturdays, recruitment for which is more difficult and costly. Recruitment to new roles and positions in the approved structure will be progressed in spring 2024.

In response to a request for clarification on the busiest day for visitors, the meeting heard that the figures were variable across the week, noting that the tourist economy has not fully recovered. In response to a question on whether the closure for lunch impacted negatively on figures, the meeting heard that there did not appear to be any issues with that one-hour closure, and that lunchtime closure is common among small attractions.

A Member asked how the figures compared to forecasts. The meeting heard that KH attracted 12K visitors p.a. prior to the pandemic, while during 2022 there were 5K visitors. The expectation was that 8K visitors would come to KH during 2023, with 4K having visited so far, with a full recovery hoped for by 2025.

A Member asked where volunteers were sourced. The Committee heard that a steady stream of volunteer applicants approached KH – primarily students and 'poetry ambassador' figures – though the main need is front-of-house people, and resilience is only realistically achieved through paid staff. A Member commented that there might be merit in sourcing volunteers from the Heath & Hampstead Society.

A Member asked whether a notice could be put up at KH with opening hours. The meeting heard that a QR code provided the information, noting that the hours are variable and that the notice boards had already been refreshed and re-designed with high-quality signage but this would be reviewed for the spring / summer season

Referencing page 19 of the agenda, a Member asked for clarification of the term "deficit fund" in the sentence "the City Corporation will deficit fund Keats House through its City's Cash Fund as follows...". The meeting noted that the term was specific to the KH charity that took into account the shortfall in the

£110K income target that did not match the cost of running KH, noting that City's Cash supported the £187K not covered by income.

On the Cultural Partnerships funding, the meeting noted that KH is the lead organisation on 'Culturally Speaking' and will receive all Education Strategy Unit funding, most of which will go to the partner organisations involved.

In response to a question, the meeting noted that it costs the CoLC £300K p.a. to run KH, including staffing, revenue and other support costs.

6. OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OPERATION OF KEATS COMMUNITY LIBRARY FROM TEN KEATS GROVE

The Committee discussed options for the future operation of Keats Community Library from Ten Keats Grove.

Referencing sections 14 and 15 of the report submitted under item 5, the meeting noted that a licence was issued to 31 March 2024.

The meeting noted that Keats Community Library (KCL) has long requested a longer licence duration for surety and to support fundraising.

The following points were made:

- A licence agreement is in place but supporting documents have not been provided (comfort letter that the licence will be renewed, and a statement of intention to pursue a longer-term licence);
- It is currently problematic to seek fundraising and investment for KCL in the current circumstances given the uncertainty;
- The CoLC Comptroller has declined to provide a comfort letter because such a letter might prejudice any future agreement;
- The main obstacle to finalising any agreement is dual use of the Nightingale Room, which is the only large space suitable for some events and hires, and that space is also used for KCL's children's library;
- The movement of books and equipment to facilitate both uses is impractical and labour-intensive (though doable) due to having to clear the room – that arrangement has been in place for a decade;
- In addition to the licence fee payable by KCL, Keats House have an income target of £19k for facilities hire, which is largely achieved through the Nightingale Room;
- CoLC members are obliged to act in the best interests of the KH charity (which can include community and cultural benefits as well as financial considerations);
- One option is to licence use of the library room and Nightingale Room to KCL for an additional approximately £19K (i.e. the current income target) with some recourse for larger events;
- The room is currently under-used partly because the CoLC is unable to invest in dedicated resources to hire out the space due to restrictions on the space's use caused by its use by KCL for their children's library;
- According to KCL, their children's library cannot operate without the use of the room.

Members suggested that an onsite briefing take place.

Members suggested that a paper setting out the options be submitted to the CHL Committee meeting of January 2024, the aim being to reach an agreement that is acceptable to all parties.

7. QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

There were no questions.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

A Member noted that a recent children's party in the room had generated complaints due to the noise level from amplified music, noting that there is no reference to amplified sound in the current agreement, and that no supervision was available on that single occasion due to staff constraints. The meeting heard that two officers were on site at the time as per operational and risk assessment requirements, that no complaints were received by them on the day, they did not note noise inconsistent with a children's party and that they left the room at the end of the day in readiness for the children's library occupation on the following Tuesday, as per the licence agreement.

A Keats commemorative event organised by the Keats Foundation is expected to take place in Westminster Abbey on 31 October 2023 at 12.15 and that CoLC Members and officers had been invited to attend on this occasion.

9. DATE AND LOCATION OF THE NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is scheduled to take place on Friday 03 May 2024 at 2.30pm at Keats House, NW3.

The meeting ended at 4.15 pm

Chairman

Contact Officer: Jayne Moore
jayne.moore@cityoflondon.gov.uk