

John Archer's first visit to Bo – March 2010

“Like to see the school pet?” My tour with William Alpha, Bo City's Chief Administrator was at a large secondary school. We go round a corner to a fenced enclosure. I peer inside. Some pet. There sits a large, adult crocodile, basking in the dry season sun. Just the latest of many surprises in Sierra Leone's remarkable second city.

I was visiting Bo with Jane Knight of the One World Link group as part of a long term work project with the City Council. The link has been sharing experience and understanding between Bo and Leamington for over 28 years. It even continued through the Country's recent devastating civil war and today is as active as ever.

The project has already helped with waste management, environmental health and finance support, involving visits by experts from the County and District Councils. My job was to help the Council develop ideas on planning for the City. But first, I needed to understand more about daily life.

The statistics tell one story, and a pretty stark one at that: highest under-5 mortality rate in the world, 60% illiteracy rate, average life expectancy in the mid 40's and a stagnant economy, with 60% of government expenditure coming from foreign aid.

Sounds bad, but there is another side. Whilst poor by any western standards, there is little evidence of despair or hopelessness. The streets throng with people; trading, travelling and working. Everywhere I went I saw endless activity and was always met with courtesy and good humour.

The infrastructure has many deficiencies: a serious lack of healthcare, dirt roadways, intermittent power, but there is a determination to improve and resourcefulness is apparent everywhere.

Nevertheless, much is needed. I visited overcrowded schools, some with over 100 pupils in a classroom. At one, lack of space meant pupils were taught outside. Very picturesque, but hopelessly impractical. “How do you manage in the rainy season?” I asked the dignified Headmistress. She looked at me. “With difficulty”, was the understated reply.

But the City Council is looking forward. The elected Mayor, Dr Wusu Sannoh wants to plan for the future. The Council itself has been in existence only since only 2004, shortly after the end of the civil war. As a result, it has no map of the City and no experience of land use planning. With no control over development the City is sprawling in an unplanned way. Commercial areas are growing haphazardly and there is no mechanism for linking infrastructure needs with growth. Planning has its critics in the UK, but the adverse consequences of no planning at all are plain to see here.

The Mayor is keen to have a “blueprint” for the City to guide it over next 10 years. Following my discussions with City Council staff in Bo, the Mayor is visiting Warwick District to take the project further. We hope to be able to improve the mapping of the City and set up a system that can help plan its growth.

The Local Plan process that many are familiar with in Warwick District may provide a guide for how to consider where new housing and new commercial areas may best be located in Bo. An additional problem to be overcome in the City, however, is that of making it happen. Controversy always surrounds planning here at home, but at

least there are procedures for dealing with disagreement. In Bo, there is no proper framework yet for stopping development going where it shouldn't and only allowing it to take place where it should. We will need to develop ideas not only for the plan itself, but for how the City can bring about more control over development.

Many challenges have come my way during my time at Warwick. This project is well outside that world and in itself that provides a challenge. I am certainly learning as much as helping. However, with the help of others, good progress has been made so far and I am confident that it will continue.