

## **CHAIR'S REPORT TO THE OWL AGM Dec 4th. 2010**

### **Dale St Methodist Church Hall Leamington Spa**

This year we've had one visitor from Bo, the city Mayor Dr Wusu Sanoh, sponsored by the Commonwealth Local Government Fund. He has been our only one, and though this was a very useful and rewarding visit, valuable time seeing how local government works, discussing issues around planning, budget and taxation, it's sad that his was the solitary visit. Perhaps a reason for this was that our energies have been directed towards preparing for exchanges and visits coming up in 2011. So, how have we moved on since last year's AGM? We have a steadily growing community of members, but I feel that our real growth is demonstrated in the structures we're building, and this is a steady on-going process.

And the driver for this is what I'd really like to touch on this afternoon: Linking, or more specifically as far as OWL is concerned, Community Linking.

Perhaps the most commonly accepted vision of what Linking is about is the link with the school to school relationships and usually a community driven project, perhaps building or renovating a small clinic or school, and perhaps providing the means to dig a well or purchase farming implements. But what we do is not quite the same, because we when we started out 30 years ago, rather than focusing on Aid, the link was set up to be all about friendship, understanding, and learning from each other. And over the years that mission is what we've been building on so that now we can look around and appreciate the breadth of what we've achieved.

#### **SCHOOLS**

We have a thriving schools linking programme with 13 schools linked and a big visit planned and funded to go out in February. The drive to make this happen has brought new faces into our schools group, and we are very fortunate to have 3 head teachers able to come along. This is very important since in Sierra Leone much significance is attached to the ranks and titles of visitors, - it's a pity that circumstances in this country are such that a school being able to release a head teacher is much more the exception than the rule. Schools linking is such a vital part of our link opening the eyes of children and teachers alike, not least due to the unceasing work done by the back-room team who have for a number of years been producing high quality teaching aids and materials for use in this country and out in Bo. We're working hard to build a communication network that will allow easy and cheap emails to be sent between the schools using the community centre as the hub in Bo, and training the school teachers to use the link to communicate with their link school here. The Centre is an ideal place for this, open long hours, it's secure, there's often help on hand and most important, it's free to use and has it's own power supply.

#### **YOUTH**

The Youth group having had to see Ben Wesson move into support mode as he starts at university, are working full tilt on the proposed youth visit for the summer of 2011. Funding has been applied for and the hope is to take four sixth formers, chosen via the competition they're currently devising, along with four OWL members, out to Bo to join in with various activities and programmes that BoOWL Youth group is busy with. The BoOWL youth group is an impressive thing. Not dissimilar to the city of Bo, estimating a head count is a risky thing, but there are a great number of young jobless people there with the energy and enthusiasm to push themselves to innovate, experiment and really apply themselves to ideas and initiatives in a way that really makes visitors from the UK really sit up and take notice. There is much there for us to learn from.

It will be a very invigorating and exciting trip for all concerned.

## LOCAL AUTHORITY

We feel that it's with the Local Authority support part of the link that we've broken new ground. Started just 3 years ago, it has spawned the Waste Management initiative, sponsored jointly by the United Nations Development Programme and the Commonwealth Local Govt Fund. Although all of us who've been running with this have been surprised at the number of pitfalls there seem to be, there can be no doubt that the mechanism that has evolved for this initiative is a really valuable one. The 3 sided triangle: UNDP; Bo City Council; and our local authority backed by the CLGF, brought together by OWL. Each stakeholder has learnt much, and has been able easily to identify areas to be re-thought and built upon.

So this framework has brought expertise from both Warwick District Council and Warwick County Council.

Our model has become something of a flagship model for the CLGF who have asked us to present at the Hastings conference to spread this model of good practice.

From the County Council, Dereck Greedy - with landfill, and Glenn Fleet- with waste management, both recognised leaders in their fields, are able to share their Bo experience (having visited several times) amongst professional associations and colleagues nationally and internationally.

Richard Hall, head of Environmental Health at the District Council having visited twice is also able to share his experiences with colleagues and groups within the sector, and Richard has also triggered a separate partnership, previously dormant, between the Rotary clubs of Bo, Kenilworth and Southam, which has resulted in the successful provision of one main potable water hydrant, leading onto the provision of several more in Bo's large central covered market.

John Archer, recently retired head of Planning at the County Council has been able to support work with William Alpha, Bo chief administrator, to develop a much more focussed and holistic approach to planning within the city. Understanding the difficulty of this work without any maps of any sort, he began to investigate the possibility of having mapping done, only to stumble on a team of Sierra Leonians working in Bo, compiling the information to make maps using hand-held GPS devices. This team were at first unable to share their data, it being classified and the property of the US Navy who are funding this work in order to build a data base for disease control should the American military need to enter Sierra Leone at some stage in the future. John chased and chased and eventually the right people agreed that once OWL had signed a Memorandum of Understanding we could have the data we wanted. Now, with the help of the Warwickshire Observatory John has been able to provide Bo City with all the maps they want built on a GIS system built here.

## SUMMARY

OWL's work within the community of Bo has now in one way or the other spread out to Freetown, Hastings (in Sierra Leone) Kenema and Makeni. We can feel justifiably proud I think, that our efforts from the ground up are touching so many lives, and I'm not just talking about lives in Sierra Leone, but lives in the UK too. Outreach is just that: our person to person linking builds friendships which in turn build trust and through locally built partnerships much has flourished. This seems a model that looks to the future too, for we are all very aware of the white elephants that dot the landscape of the Sierra Leones of this world; good intentions are only just that without the solid foundations and structures that

allow individuals to flourish and feel valued regardless of status. Sustainability must be a given; OWL as part of the Big Society is making its mark now and ensuring its sustainability for years to come.

What price the flow in consultant working from a 5 star hotel in Freetown compared to this on the ground approach, community to community, local authority to local authority?