

The CGCA's ability to react fast to requests for help from local residents is possible as a result of the superb assistance we get from a small and diverse team of volunteers. Some are local, some travel into Covent Garden, one even travels in from Bedfordshire; one arranges his holidays around CGCA's busy times of the year; all are amazingly committed.

We have enjoyed an incredibly busy and demanding year. Much of our advice has centred on planning and licensing applications, housing advice and welfare benefits. The CGCA receives an increasing number of enquiries about every aspect of Covent Garden by email –from locals as well as from the other side of the globe. We have found it hard to keep up with the almost daily demands to add items to our website and despite daily up-dates, the number of people accessing this information continues to increase.

The absence of a 24-hour noise team in Camden is a constant source of extra work for the CGCA (not to mention for Camden Council itself). There is no quick response for any Camden resident disturbed by yet another shop being re-fitted over night or by a noisy rave until 5am. Our Westminster residents, on the other hand, do have a 24-hour response team. However, experience has taught us that this reactive service is not much better than an active or even pro-active service on the next working day. Again, we have been surprised by the lack of professionalism and client-focused approach and many residents believe the benefits of the 'service' to be grossly overstated.

With the help of volunteers we have successfully taken hundreds of photographs which we use when commenting on planning and licensing applications or when we complete environmental defect & complaint forms. Our night-time video escapades often last until the early hours and have resulted in a very useful library of evidence at future hearings and appeals.

The past year has seen an increase in partnership working with other central London groups and organisations and the CGCA has found this a positive, albeit time-consuming way of tackling common problems. Our own Housing & Advice Network meetings are a very useful, new way of keeping in close contact with local organisations and individuals and we expect to build this up as an area-wide resource and networking tool.

The upsurge in the use of email and the Web has reminded us that the CGCA urgently needs a broadband Internet connection – as we do not have a budget for this, we are on the look-out for someone to sponsor our annual connection fee!

Looking back over the past year, we realise how much time has been spent on completing mind-numbing monitoring forms, progress reports and briefing notes. Whilst the Government is busy removing administrative hurdles for businesses on all fronts, it seems as if voluntary groups with small budgets are completing more paperwork than ever before. Perhaps we should ask CGCA members which aspect of our work they value and benefit from most? We could be far more accountable if we spent more of our time addressing our

members' needs. Whilst we appreciate the financial support that we receive from both Westminster and Camden councils, together with that received from our members and funding from some local businesses, a little less form-filling and a lot more encouragement and recognition for all the work we undertake for our community would not go amiss.

John Bos, Co-ordinator

Housing & Advice Network

One of the most significant CGCA initiatives this year has been the creation of the Housing & Advice Network (HAN). For many years the CGCA has championed the rights of local people in respect of housing and quality of life issues, but it was felt we needed much more regular contact with local people to ensure we focused on priority issues and that Covent Gardeners had greater involvement in what the CGCA does. The HAN has met on two occasions and the meetings have been well attended and lively. Representatives from Peabody Wild Street, Endell Street, Siddons and Stirling, Wintergarden, Betterton House, and the two local housing co-operatives have attended. Other associations have expressed strong interest in a network forum which brings local people together.

From the first meeting the CGCA was tasked with raising several issues relevant to particular estates. In