

North London LETS

Report on the new Online System – what went wrong?

I hope that members will forgive me for mentioning certain matters in the course of this narrative, which had everything gone smoothly, would have been confined to the archives of history, but in the face of the current situation, remain painfully relevant. I have tried to establish a chronology of the process of going online, so that members can be aware of the context of the EGM.

Discussions about going web-based have been ongoing since early 2007, in the context of efforts made by some members of the management group to carry out a thorough analysis of both office and management committee roles – the fact that the project has been championed by Woody, long-time member of North London LETS, and trustee of LETSlink UK, persuaded me - against my better judgement - to proceed with it in the face of ongoing resistance by office staff, and it was never agreed to completely transfer to the new system, but to keep the desk-based system going in parallel.

Minutes of the meeting held on **23rd March 2007** were forwarded by Woody, they had not sent to me, although they featured a great deal of discussion in my absence about the brochure website and the online system, for example “Mary Fee has been asked to maintain our website and provide demonstrations of the two online systems she has designed for LETSlink a subscription to LETSlink London had been agreed at the last meeting. Changes to the operation of the NLETS systems should be decided by the Management Group. The AGM was the first demonstration of the online system and no decisions have yet been made. Andy will investigate facilities for a demonstration at the event on June 2007.

Meanwhile, Jo, a non-MG member, was running a yahoo group, that a small minority of NLETS members were using, and asked for a replacement moderator on **6th May 2008**, as she wanted to leave North London LETS – the MG didn’t seem to see any connection between this and running web-based system, but it no longer seems to be in operation.

Looking over the old records including email correspondence as well as minutes, it appears that

discussions were interminable. Helen, former office, had succeeded in “talking out” the proposal for two years, which was the context in which Woody, as chair could not silence her interminable “rabbiting on” and lost control, resulting in the setting up, in **November 2007**, of a set of Guidelines for Conduct at Meetings, which acknowledges that those who prevent others from speaking by talking across them are also culpable.

Significantly, in **November 2007**, when Helen, was struggling with health issues in the face of the considerable workload in the office, with inherent problems of delegation and supervision, the management group received a paper from Rebecca and Martine, which analysed the workload involved in running the paper-based system, recommending that significant aspects of the work of running NLETS be carried on outside the office. The attached paper having been accepted in principle, we assumed that the MG understood there were many aspects of the work of running the scheme that they could themselves embrace, and that these roles existed whether the system was paper-based or online. These ideas have been reflected and developed in the list of management group roles which is available to view on the website www.nllets.org.uk/members/info/managementgroup.php

Members of the intro team cannot remember enrolling Donna in NLETS – it appears that she was engaged directly as a member of the office team without reference to the procedures for screening members at introductory meetings, and she had clearly been briefed on the “policy” of the office-team. It is not, however, clear, that she was briefed on the work already done in relation to roles on the management group. The first reference to her is that she was working in the office in the minutes of **5th March 2008**. Those minutes also record: 5. In relation to the proposed online system, Mary asked for feedback on the demonstration. Andy asked for more information on data security. It was agreed the online system will not replace the social aspect of NLETS and it will be made clear that members can still use NLETS without using a computer. Agreed the Management group will consider the online system further in relation to the role of Office Co-ordinator - but this does not seem to have been followed up.

In **April 2008** as requested, I contributed a substantial newsletter item for mailing out to

members introducing the idea of an online system as an extended “Members Area”, which has been made available as a background to this report - it was apparently accompanied by a questionnaire.

At the end of **September 2008** there was a flurry of correspondence within the MG in response to an email from Rebecca that “one of the office 'workers' – who turned out to be Donna - has just had their benefits stopped, following saying in an interview that they were doing a few hours 'work' in the office”. Because of this I was asked to remove the MG minutes from the password-protected members area immediately. I then had a conflicting request from another members of the MG to restore them, (but in the event kept the minutes off the site, until the end of July 2009, when I found the originals, removed surnames, and reloaded the PDFs in order to restore recent minutes to the archive). The winter mailing, prior to the October social announced that the The SGM will begin at 4pm with an online demonstration by Mary Fee, followed by a social.

On **11th October 2008**, Donna compiled a list of questions and answers on the use of the online system (attached) in preparation for the SGM, where it was agreed to adopt the online system, (but cannot find any minutes). However, minutes of the MG held on **November 19th 2008** state that the “The group overseeing the change to online system is Henu, Donna, Woody and Mary, and Wendy will also join the group. It was agreed that Andy would also invite Ian Baker of the ME network. Henu will contact Mary to arrange a meeting of the group.”

There was a flurry of emails prior to this meeting, in which I asked the members concerned to write their job descriptions, and had no response, except for an email from Donna on **29th November 2008** stating “I would like to point out that it is usually the office that does the routine work, such as keeping the current database up to date. I would imagine that it will still be the office members doing the work with the new system, although we are always open to new volunteers” to which I can find no direct response, nor are there any minutes of this meeting. However, it was evident that we and the office co-ordinator were at cross-purposes regarding “lines of command” on implementing the system.

On **12th February 2009** an encouraging email came from Rebecca: "Well done Mary on your

work to date! I think its a good idea the localised sub groups. As you may know I'm part of CHATI (Crouch End and Hornsey Area Transition Initiative) and I was thinking a more localised LETS would be good. There's also lots of differing residents associations eg Stroud Green RA (SGRA). For now if its do-able to have borough wide under the umbrella of NLETS and go more micro later then great!"

Rebecca drafted a note for the Newsletter, prior to the EGM. Can we have a Macro and Micro NLETS? Yes we can! LETS models are being widely used to build sustainable communities, especially in the Transition Initiatives. We need the option to trade within walking distances as the climate issues require us to urgently 'power down'. Mary Fee from LETSlink, who has set up our online system proposes we implement sub neighbourhood groups under the broader umbrella of NLETS. We could do this in stages eg have borough sub groups. Come and tell us what you think or email NLETS.

However, Donna offered her own version: NLETS is due to go online by the **21 February**, the date of the AGM. Anyone attending the AGM can be started on the system immediately, provided they have an email address. Please note that you will need to enter your offers and wants, since these could not be transferred from the old database. You also need to be up-to-date with your subscription - money accepted on the night! Anyone who cannot attend the AGM will be released onto the system at a later date. We are looking for neighbourhood representatives who would be willing to both familiarise current members with the database and introduce new members, setting them up. Pledges would be paid to such representatives in recompense for their essential contribution to NLETS. Local groups could then hold their own socials, trading days, etc. Members could, of course, still approach any NLETS member. Please contact Donna at the office on Monday afternoons (from 3 p.m.), or leave a message on the answerphone, on 7281 0919 or email her at donna_nlets@o2.co.uk.

I'm not sure which was used, however we got the data from Donna on **16th February 2009** and Wendy and Donna accessed their accounts, after which there seems to have been a long period during which Donna and I were working through various issues concerning reconciling the accounts.

On **27th March 2009** Donna emailed about the fact that Batya had volunteered to work with the online system, from home, and giving me her phone number. I cannot believe I did not follow up on this, as I was keen for others to be involved – I can only assume I did not get through to Batya, and months later I discovered that she had suffered an attack in the street outside her home, and perhaps at the time she was unable to take phone calls. The same day Barb (who could have made an effective contribution), resigned from the MG because of a flurry of emails, in her message she said: I am also a bit mystified about the role of the MG when most of the decisions seem to be coming from the office.”

Minutes of the MG meeting held on **12th March 2009** made absolutely no reference whatsoever to the online system, whilst the Spring 2009 mailing cover-letter promised members that the directory would be both online and manual, but put the onus on members to log on and enter their current offers and wants before the directory could be produced. The same newsletter (about which we were not consulted) gratuitously “resigned” myself and Woody from the Intro Team, stating that we now wanted to focus their energies on overseeing and facilitating this valuable process.

It was not until we sent an email from the system on **28th March 2009** that we opened up the system to members as a whole, and released their passwords. There was no response from the MG about this, but instead correspondence between Donna and Wendy concerning Helen the former office co-ordinator, that she still seemed to want to have a role in the system. Donna interpreted this in the sense that she might want to work in the office, and it fell to me to write to her tactfully to putting her off as it could have caused difficulties, but clearly she could have worked from home, and it’s a shame that we did not find a way of finding a constructive role for her.

On **1st April 2009** I reported to the MG that member accounts were now open, pointing out to them that those without email addresses did not receive the unlock message. So an obvious thing to do would be for management group members to see which members near them do not have an email address shown, and call them to see if they have one, amend it into their record then let Donna know via the Contact Us box, so she could make a note of it on the office computer and unlock their password. The next tranche would be getting an email address

for members who don’t have one. No mention was made of the need to follow up the launch of the online system on the minutes of the meeting held on **16th April 2009**, the only discussion was about MG roles, and from rough notes (not recorded in the minutes) I undertook to put them up on the website.

May was largely taken up with taking part in the Haringay Independence Day, an awful lot of work, including mailing out leaflets for them, placing an advert in their programme, and meeting up with the local Timebank Worker with Wendy, leading up to an event which was disappointing in that it was hardly attended by the general public, only activists who seemed more interested in squatting buildings than taking part in LETS. Then we did yet another demo of the system, and enabled some members to access their accounts and enrol at the Love London event on 6th June.

Apart from Donna in the office, and Henu, doing enrolments (Woody can hardly type due to having had a stroke), only Wendy became interested in updating the site and received intensive online tuition from me, on the basis that she was taking up the role of Directory Editor. We also started developing project pages, but Donna disapproved of some work Wendy had done on a poster design for the office, and deleted the relevant page. Meanwhile, I had suggested to Wendy starting with local members to help them get online, but when I discovered that she had launched a called North by North West LETS without reference to me, I became concerned that the main online project had been forgotten, and tackled her by email about it. I had created a project page for the group so it could be linked from www.nllets.org.uk/map.htm but Wendy deleted it, leaving a link to a non-existent page. To avoid these problems arising in future I removed “delete project page” from the menu. This was the background to the fateful meeting on **26th June 2009** – an upset Wendy, my worry that the online project was drifting, and a lack of understanding on the part of Alex, whose turn it was to chair, about the serious issues we were facing. A full account of what happened at this meeting is on the website under "Minority Report".

I was away for the weekend, but the following Monday evening, I stayed up late drafting a message, which is was sent at 03.51am - thus it was a first draft that should have had the benefit of editing. It set out three options (i) pursue Woody

over his behaviour in which case I would oppose them (ii) hold an EGM to bring it all into the open (iii) follow Woody and my recommendations to make the online project a success. In response, Rosalind resigned, without having minuted the June meeting, and Donna broke confidentiality by forwarding my email message to others, then cutting me out of the circulations of the MG. This, and the fact that she had told the MG she suffers from depression, made me doubt her judgement and I feared – accurately as it turned out – that she was prepared to cause damage by spreading distress to the members. I therefore reduced her admin privileges to committee level so that she could not email out to members from the site, but could still update member records. This meant she could not process pledges cheques online, until I found a way to separate these functions, and soon restored her admin privileges. She still had sufficient access to update the online directory, but chose not to do so.

I was so concerned about the situation, that I almost postponed my holiday, in July, in order to attend the meeting which had been planned on the **28th July**, and was still displayed on the website, after the MG meeting on 23rd July had already been held. Little did I know that all normal business had been abandoned in favour of drafting the officious and unnecessary letter to Woody dated **27th July 2009**. It's unlikely that he could have been persuaded to attend another MG meeting anyway, so upset was he about what had occurred, and to receive by registered mail, this sanctimonious letter purporting that LETSlink trustees and disabilities advice agencies had been consulted was adding insult to injury.

When I suspected that Donna was “hedging her bets” by carrying out all transactions on the existing system in duplication with the online system – she has persistently refused to reply to my requests for information - while the MG were making no effort to help members access their accounts (half had never logged on), I began emailing out myself from the website - to encourage them to do so myself.

Meanwhile, I sought advice from LETSlink London trustees and helped Woody send letters dated 12th August to individual members of the MG inviting them to dis-associate themselves from the official letter he had received. However, this caused the MG to hold yet another secret meeting in August, in order to draft a reply to Woody, blaming him for

the fact that they had been forced to spend further time on the issue - a pointless waste of time. Apparently as a result of my decision to support Woody because of the way he was treated at the June meeting, I began receiving increasingly threatening letters and emails from Donna, and my own account and the system account were tampered with, which could have been done by anyone with committee-level access, which was even more worrying. Meanwhile, because I was concerned about the effect of all this on Woody's health, and since just opening the envelopes had given me palpitations, I didn't even read the formal letters they sent me, and their legal threats not being taken seriously seemed to upset the MG even more.

Eventually, at Henu's request I stopped trying to dialogue with Donna, and Henu began her own campaign to call an EGM for election purposes, on the grounds that the MG was below par, rather than continuing the blame game. The MG in turn removed Henu from the circulation list, and this is how, both in the dark, we sent out the first EGM notice, unaware that they had changed their minds.

Having done an enormous amount of technical and design work, as well as data crunching, my job was complete, and I should have been able to withdraw to work with other groups. Even though my energy has been severely drained by this project, I have subsequently installed similar online systems for SIX other groups, but many others are waiting in line for me to be able to devote time to them.

In order to achieve this, I should have had direct access to a team that I could train and delegate the work of implementing the online system, taking on roles such as Enrolment Co-ordinator, Member support, Directory Editor, Pledge Accountant, and local Events Organisers, etc, in order to implement the system by getting members involved.

Instead of this, we have been systematically obstructed by a remarkably efficient office worker, and a dysfunctional management group, farcically united under her chairmanship. Surprisingly, even now, two members of the diminishing management group have yet to embrace a role, and there has been no provision for new co-opted members to receive any briefing from as to how they can engage with the online system. Things are not looking too good.

Mary Fee (mary@letslink.org) – 8th Oct 2009