

## **NLLETS: North London Local Exchange Trading Scheme:**

[www.nllets.org.uk](http://www.nllets.org.uk)

### **Background paper for the AGM to be held on Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> April from 2pm.**

These notes are intended to be read in conjunction with the main papers, and are presented in the same order. I am personally a member of North London LETS, but also have been responsible for hosting NLLETS website since 2006 and the online system from 2008 as secretary of LETSlink.

### **REPORT ON THE ONLINE SYSTEM**

It will have been apparent that we were not consulted before the questionnaire was circulated, but as it represents only 10% response rate the results obtained are not significant. On 3<sup>rd</sup> March an email message required me to report to a meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> March, but I could not attend due to a prior engagement, so I'm sorry I could not influence the report, which was misleading in several respects.

The reason that some pages can only be updated by the webmaster is that they belong to the original website, which we began hosting in 2006 to prevent it disappearing as it was not being maintained. We started putting minutes in a password-protected "Members Area" from February 2007 onwards until last year when the MG stopped sending them out: <http://www.nllets.org.uk/archive/index.htm>.

It's surprising that the group who are campaigning to take over management of the website were unaware of its basic structure. The page requires two passwords, which will be emailed to members.

The Management Group elected in February 2009, did not much interest in the system - no training sessions were agreed upon, leaving us with no option but to discuss it as part of the normal meeting. At the June 2009 meeting when a member who was the online consultant at the time queried how the pledge budgeting was being carried out, was talked across whilst he was trying to speak, then told his topic was not on the agenda. Thus goaded into losing control, he left the meeting, and shortly afterwards so did I, having failed to persuade the remaining members to "move on" with the agenda.

I tried to reason with them by email, but both of us received recorded delivery letters warning us to keep away from meetings and not to email members of the MG. Another colleague who had been voted on to the MG was simply excluded from communications, which meant not knowing when meetings were taking place. So the project was effectively aborted at this point in time. This is why I have continued to provide systems support direct to members, without being able to hand it over.

Prior to the October EGM, the office co-ordinator published all members email addresses, and two other members used them to mail out their own messages. We have sent out

messages from the system when requested, which keeps the volume of messages at a manageable level. This function could be delegated. However, due to the inappropriate tone of the office co-ordinator's emails to us, we have continued to exercise due diligence as regards this aspect of managing the scheme.

It is not clear what is meant by the statement "reports are difficult to produce". If members, including the MG do not know how to do anything on the system they only needed to ask.

Options are available, such as uploading newsletters, which are not being used by the management group, for reasons which are unclear. Upgrades to some of the facilities provided by the software are available, but have not been installed. Sending abusive and threatening messages to us, blanking us when we request feedback on the system, and circulating libellous statements with questionnaires inviting members to criticise, do not contribute towards maintaining a good working relationship.

We had done our own research, and were well aware of Community Exchange, but we decided against it as it is run by a South African group:  
<http://www.ces.org.za/exchparams.asp?country=UK>

This is the system which is now being mooted for NLETS, and an account has already been set up. The one we chose, Local Exchange, had been commissioned by Francis Ayley, now in the USA, who was co-founder of NLETS; as we felt that it would most closely match the needs of NLETS.

The agreement at the October 2009 EGM was that the MG would try out the system for a year, but back it up at all times with the office-based system, so that they could revert back to the paper-based system if required. However, when members at the October 2010 EGM overwhelmingly demanded a printed directory, the one that was produced omitted any listings that had not been submitted online. Now it has been turned around so that members have to specifically request one. We have not been told whether pledge transactions have been backed up on the office computer. However, they can if necessary be re-constructed from the information on the website.

Despite provocation, we have kept the system available to members. We were persuaded to attend October EGM on the basis that these problems would be properly addressed, but unfortunately what transpired was a sort of encounter group, where all protocol was abandoned, and members were induced by a sort of group hysteria into obsessing about their fears, eg of being attacked by an elderly disabled man who was purported to have threatened the committee with his walking stick.

Before NLETS, we had installed the same software for only two other groups. Since then we have hosted sites for nine other LETS groups and two other community groups. Each has had its different needs, according to the technical ability and mission of the project leaders, but ALL have required training and ongoing support over a considerable period to achieve success. Role analysis is an essential part of the process - we took as a

starting point the work that had been done in November 2007 by a member of the MG analysing the roles needed to run NLETS. The whole point of the online system was to enable MG members to participate in the management of the system so that office staff can focus on the necessary desk-based paperwork, and the reason for the problems that have occurred in North London LETS is that a working relationship has not been maintained, due to the conflicts that have arisen, and which remain unresolved.

## **CODE OF CONDUCT and PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CONSTITUTION:**

Given the problems that NLETS is experiencing I am concerned that there such an emphasis on these insignificant details. The extended Code of Conduct appears to have been written with a view to justifying the behaviour of the MG, who abandoned normal business last summer in favour of sending legally-drafted letters out to elected members whom they sought to exclude from the MG. With goodwill and competence, such a detailed code would not be necessary. The MG has always been a space where real debate and emotional exchange can take place between people well known to each other, without such arbitrary rules being imposed. Heated interchanges during meetings have always been kept private to those present, with minutes simply recording decisions, and not brought to the attention of ordinary members in the truly shocking way which has recently occurred.

Specifically, I am concerned that the right of members to receive minutes of MG meetings is apparently being curtailed in favour of members being allowed to inspect them. The ability to inspect the minutes is precisely what was being provided until the current MG stopped making their minutes available on the website. Does “inspect” mean that members will have to knock on the door at 1a Waterlow Road? This agenda item appears to me to introduce an unpleasant, coercive tone into NLETS and I would reject the whole package in favour of a proper review at a later EGM.

## **STRUCTURE OF NORTH LONDON LETS**

The history of North London LETS has been fraught with difficulties. It was set up as a LETSsystem – which has no democratic input from the members - but was converted to a LETScheme around the year 2000, and became affiliated to LETSlink UK at this time, when the original founders were no longer involved in running the organisation. This meant that members would henceforth appoint a management committee to oversee the work of the administrator/s based in the office.

At first I inhabited the office, then shared it with NLETS, but eventually withdrew. Most LETS groups don't have an office as such. They may have an official address, and a key person may designate a room in their home as an official space, but usually a “Core Group” shares the workload according to their particular abilities, working from home. The very existence of the office base has meant that NLETS has unusual problems, because they have always controlled the input and output of communications, had their own rota of helpers, and established their own “anti-MG” culture.

Therefore, control of the “system”, has always been an issue between the office and the MG. Sometimes the relationship between the two groups been managed reasonably well, with some MG members participating in the office work. At other times the management group have had very little idea what went on in the office, despite the fact that in their role as trustees, they were responsible for supervising the work that took place there - I know this, because some years ago, I was asked to visit staff in the office and find out what was going on!

Only relatively recently, staff in the office were invited to attend management group meetings in order to keep both sides better informed. The online system threatens to disrupt this monopoly, and what we are experiencing is a backlash on the part of the office staff attempting to maintain control of communications, whilst seeking to appoint volunteers to carry out other tasks, which calls into question the role of the MG.

At the June 2009 meeting, long-standing members having retired from the management group or being on sick leave, inexperienced management group members, who were rotating chairmanship of the group, and struggling to understand the issues, voted the office co-ordinator in as chair, thus upsetting the necessary balance between these two elements in the management of the scheme.

NLLETS has had a high turnover of membership throughout its history. Four fifths of those who joined have left. New members are not supported – and never have been – they either sink or swim. Socials, excellent though they are, only take place every quarter. Nevertheless we believe many long-standing friendships have continued outside the formal scheme, and we are well aware of the fact that the real value of North London LETS has been this long-established informal network.

The paper-based system always used up a lot of the resources of NLLETS, and it was the hope of the MG member who championed the online system, that it would improve the level of participation overall. Before the last EGM more than half the members had not logged on. I contacted those without email addresses in the database and had a good response - currently two-thirds have now accessed the system - so there has been progress, but has it been worth the distress experienced?

Some time after the October EGM I was invited by the officer co-ordinator to put my ideas for restructuring NLLETS into a “melting pot”, but could not take part on this basis, as I needed to be able to appraise the situation near the time of the AGM and report directly to members, as I am now doing. There are a number of ideas that I could suggest, for moving forward, but in my view, NLLETS cannot develop as an organisation without maintaining an ethos of goodwill between all parties, so please bear this in mind as a priority when electing members to the MG.

**MF 9/4/2010**