

**THE COMMONWEALTH ASSOCIATION
18th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
Marlborough House
28 June 2019**



Chairperson's Report for 2018 – 2019

This report covers the period July 2018 to June 2019, with the accounting year for financial information being 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018.

Not long before our last Annual General Meeting, we were busy with the London CHOGM. We sent delegates and representatives to both CHOGM and the Forums which were held in parallel with it. The Commonwealth hit the news at that time, although it's true and unavoidable that much of the coverage even in the non-British media was about the connection between the organisation and the Royal Family.

This year things have quietened down considerably and the Commonwealth has hit the news just very occasionally. For the Association, however, it has been a time of transition, review and consolidation.

1. General

At our last AGM, Cheryl Dorall stood down after 10 years as our Secretary and was replaced by David Blake. We thanked Cheryl at the AGM, but the minutes which she wrote only briefly mentioned her withdrawal from the role. Cheryl's contribution to our activities over the years has been immense and needs to be firmly placed on the record. Her role as Secretary was never limited to taking the minutes and calling meetings. She initiated our Google Group, set up our website and brought us into the 21st century with the use of EventBrite for organising registration for Association events. Cheryl has a reputation for enjoying a good party and has organized some very good ones for the Association. Your Executive Committee has missed Cheryl during the year, although there have been occasions when we have asked for her valuable

advice. We've been very envious of all her travels and are glad that she is intending to be with us at the AGM.

2. Commonwealth reforms and restructure

The Secretariat has continued its reform programme during the current year and the results of this can be seen in its *Annual results report* which appears on its website at <http://www.thecommonwealth.org/reports-and-accounts>. It summarized the Secretariat's financial situation to June 2018 thus:

The Secretariat's total direct budget expenditures during the financial year ending 30 June 2018 amounted to £25.9 million. This reflects 88% expenditure of the approved direct budget of £29.5 million for the financial year 2017/2018. The Secretariat implemented a total of 41 projects in the 2017/2018 programme of work. Of the approved budget, 52% was allocated to the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), 41% and 7% were allocated to the COMSEC fund and CYP fund respectively. The funds had been partially financed by £1.4 million in designated funds and £3.4 million in Extra Budgetary Resources for specific programme implementation. The approved direct budget of £29.5 million for the financial year 2017/2018 is split between programme costs budget at £17.3 million (58%) and staff costs budget at £12.3 million (42%). Total direct budget expenditures of £25.9 million during the financial year constitute £15.1 million (58%) and £10.8 million (42%) towards programme expenditures and staff expenditures respectively. Expenditure across the funds of £25.9 million constitute £10.5 million of a planned £12.1 million in COMSEC (87%); £13.5 million of a planned £15.4 million in CFTC (88%); and £1.9 million of a planned £2.1 million in CYP (91%).

Where core funding was £51.9 million in 2012/13, it fell to £37.9 million in 2016/17. It was expected to be £32.3 million in 2018/19, but the extract above would indicate that it might have been even lower.

The difficulties which the Secretariat are facing are emphasized by the decision to vacate Commonwealth House (formerly Quadrant House) and put all staff across the road in Marlborough House.

3. Governance of the Association

The Executive Committee has met four times at Marlborough House during the year, in September, December, March and June. Attendance has been good, although the fact that we meet during the afternoon has sometimes made it difficult for members who are still working to attend or to be present for the whole meeting. On two occasions when Stuart Mole was unable to get up to London from Devon, we were able to use *Skype* and *Blue Jeans* to effectively have him in the room with us.

4. Outreach and Partnerships: relations with the Secretariat and the rest of the Commonwealth family

We reported last year that the Secretariat has recognized that former staff could have a role to play in helping the organization. In particular the Secretariat accepted that former staff would be especially suitable for some temporary posts because they have the institutional memory which the organization is in danger of losing. The initiative has not been finalized but a few former members of staff have returned to work at Marlborough House. We are not at liberty to disclose the full details because we don't know them.

An interesting development this year has been the acquisition by the Secretariat Archives of a large number of photograph albums of Commonwealth events from the collection of the late Derek Ingram, a great friend of the Association. The archivist has appealed for help in identifying people, places and events. It is clear that many of our members are uniquely placed to do this and several members have begun assisting with this work.

The Association has been represented at the two sessions of the Secretary-General's Dialogue with Accredited Organisations. These enable us to learn a good deal about what is happening at the Secretariat and in the rest of the Commonwealth family and gives us an opportunity to take part in discussion and analysis.

The Association has also participated in meetings of IFCO, the Independent Forum of Commonwealth Organisations.

We are intending to use these meetings to spread the word about the Association to people working in Commonwealth organisations. Alumni of these bodies are, of course, eligible to join the Association.

Patsy Robertson also attended a meeting with the members of the High Level Group on the Governance Arrangements of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Two of their reports are available on the IFCO website.

5. Membership

The Association is nothing without its members. At our last AGM, membership stood at 175. There has been little change over the year. A few new members have joined, a few have left us and our total is now 174. However, this includes quite a number who are not paid up to date and this situation will need to be attended to.

Remembering Members and former Colleagues

It is a sad fact that by the very nature of our organization, we lose friends when they pass away. We are particularly sorry to have to record the death since our last meeting of Dr Moses Anafu (Ghana), who was for decades an important member of the team which were the support staff of the Commonwealth's successful initiatives to end racism in Southern Africa, as well as Sir Alister McIntyre, former Chancellor of the University of the West Indies and a distinguished economist who served on many Commonwealth and international investigations into the economies of small member states.

Others whose deaths we record here were not all long serving or current members of the Association but they were colleagues in the Commonwealth family. These included Noreen John (Dominica), Maryse Roberts (Seychelles) and Jasbir Singh (Malaysia).

The death of the distinguished journalist, Derek Ingram, was noted and regretted throughout the Commonwealth. Derek devoted over four decades of intellectual support for the Commonwealth through the Commonwealth Journalists Association, which he founded in the late 1960's with the financial and other assistance of the Secretariat. In those early days of the existence of the new and modern Commonwealth, his reporting on events in the Commonwealth as a whole, through a network of dedicated journalists, was instrumental in securing its reputation as an important new international organisation.

Where possible Association members have attended funerals and have often been able to help families. The messages which have circulated in the Google group have often been of comfort and assistance to relatives. In the case of at

least one of the above, some of those messages have been reprinted in the programme for a memorial service.

6. Finance

In 2018 the Association had income of £2,050, including £1,995 from membership subscriptions, £195 less than subscription income in 2017. In a non-CHOGM year expenditure was also lower than the previous year, resulting in a surplus of £609.54. This compared with a surplus on the General Fund for the previous year of £582.80. This left the Association with £4,271.94 in the bank at 31 December 2018, which included £25 earmarked in a charity fund.

Members are reminded that since January 2017, the subscription rate for those resident in the UK is £20 annually, and for non-UK residents it is £10. Some members have not amended their standing orders and consequently have been under paying. Please adjust any bank instructions you may have made previously and pay any consequent arrears.

A report on our Finances is contained in a separate Treasurer's Report which is attached to this report. The accounts have been audited by Rickie Sankar and I commend them to you.

7. Planning for the future

The Committee has continued the task of overhauling how the Association works and looking at ways of improving our performance and raising our visibility. Members are most welcome to let us have their views on any of these areas.

Increasing membership

A major problem for us has been declining membership. The inevitable loss of some members caused by death has already been mentioned, but other factors work against us. The Secretariat's 'rotation' policy means that many current staff do not have the same attachment to the Commonwealth that those who worked there in the past had and this has led to fewer people joining us when they leave the Secretariat. There have also been problems because some members do not pay their subscriptions, build up large arrears and do not respond to requests to bring themselves up to date. This situation is unsustainable and we have no alternative but to remove non-payers from

the books, to stop sending them communications and to refrain from sending them invitations to events, in line with the decision taken at the AGM in 2016. This regularizes the situation, but reduces our membership, which is something we do not want to do.

The net effect of all this is that we badly need to recruit new members. Your Committee will be approaching the Secretariat to ensure that all those who leave it are aware of the Association's existence.

The Committee is strengthening its links with the Secretariat's Social Club, which celebrated its 70th anniversary during the year. Founded by our Chair, Patsy Robertson among others, the Club provides a valuable place where staff can meet at the end of the working week. It also opens its doors to former staff members who wish to take part. The Association joined with the Social Club to celebrate the anniversary and a good time was had by all. The Committee will be exploring the possibilities for future co-operation, although the vacating of Commonwealth House restricts the possibilities.

In addition to this, we need to contact as many people as possible and encourage them to join. We'd like to encourage you all to try to recruit at least one new member during the year. If you know someone who worked with you who isn't a member of the Association, please try to recruit them.

We'd also like to remind you that the Association welcomes members not just from those who have worked for the Secretariat, but also from those who have been employed by Commonwealth organisations. We intend to increase our activities in this area by networking.

Communicating with members

The Google group enables us to exchange information on any topic related to the Commonwealth. Messages are sent through email to all members and anyone can participate in the discussion. During the year there have been 109 messages, just over two a week. Some have been about forthcoming events or about new publications or items on the internet and there has also been news about former colleagues. The system is also used to communicate with members about Association business. Don't rely on others to pass on information: if you have something to say, say it through the group.

The Committee would also like to hear whether members are active on social media such as Facebook, as this would be another way to keep in touch.

Communicating with the world – the website

For some time the Committee has been aware that the Association's website is out of date and needs complete refurbishment. It has been looking at how the current site can be closed down and a new one created and there should be developments on this during the next month or two. Any member who is in a position to assist us in this task would be a welcome asset to our team.

Social events

The Association has traditionally had two social events each year – the AGM with its associated reception and the pre-Christmas reception, a smaller event which has been held in the Atrium around the start of December. The difficulty with the latter is that there are limits on the number of people who can be accommodated in the Atrium. We are currently considering what to do this year and will give members as much notice as possible.

If any members have ideas on social events and would also like to organize them, please let us know.

7. Conclusion

Once again, I must thank the Commonwealth Secretary-General for allowing us to hold this annual event in Marlborough House. As always, her staff have been very supportive and we are grateful to them. In addition, I know you would wish me to express our gratitude to the Secretary-General for joining us at our reception after last year's Annual General Meeting and for her timely and positive remarks about the value of the Commonwealth and our role in maintaining support and interest in the Secretariat and its work. I must also thank our Association members for their support and encouragement of the Executive Committee for all these years.

Patsy Robertson

Chairperson

22 June 2019