

Dear Sir/Madam,

We are writing to you regarding the situation with Bethnal Green Weightlifting Club (BGWLC), the Club's tenancy and the Mainstream Grants Programme.

It has come to our attention that the Club's situation was discussed at at the last Commissioner's meeting and that the Club's position was not accurately represented.

In order to clarify the situation, we would first like to give some background on who we are and what we do.

Bethnal Green Weightlifting Club has provided facilities and coaching for the practice of Strength Sports in East London since 1926.

What we offer is a specialised form of training based on the use of free weights. Unlike the machines found in most sports centres, use of free weights trains the body's muscles in a balanced fashion. Properly coached, free weights training will improve balance, co-ordination and strength, with lower risk of injury than the majority of sports.

All of our sessions are properly coached.

Our gym is a specialist facility equipped to train lifters of any level - from the newest beginner to world champions (of which we have had more than one.)

We provide an environment in which people learn how to become stronger.

Strength sports (in our case, Powerlifting and Olympic Weightlifting) are contested in classes defined in terms of age, weight and gender. There is therefore no requirement for our users to be physically comparable, as might be the case in a team sport such as football. Our main training sessions are open to all and at any given session you will see a remarkable demographic mix - men and women of all ages and backgrounds training together.

Strength training with free weights is a necessarily co-operative exercise (equipment must be shared and the practice of "spotting" is essential to safe training) which builds engagement between individuals. Competition is also a supportive environment - members of the club are always on hand to offer encouragement. Although strength sports are fundamentally about individual improvement and effort, they take place in a social environment.

BGWLC's gym is currently based in a building belonging to Tower Hamlets council, which it has occupied continuously since 1948.

Until July 2014 the Club was run in partnership with a succession of other bodies:

- Tower Hamlets Life-Long Learning
- Tower Hamlets Adult Education Service
- Inner London Educational Authority
- London County Councils

With the closure of the Bethnal Green Centre in 2014 and the cancellation of all classes, the Club has continued to operate independently with the Council's tacit approval, but without a lease.

In June 2014, Faruk Miah from LBTH confirmed by email that Idea Store would stop running classes. BGWLC enquired then about taking over the lease.

In July, Judith St John confirmed that the building would transfer to corporate asset management team and referred us to Howard Lock.

A meeting took place at the end of July:

Mr Lock confirmed that there were no immediate plans for the site of the gym, nor were there any plans to sell the site for residential development. However, he confirmed that long term plans for the site as a whole (both the Gym and the School) are being considered.

Mr Lock inquired as to the Club's current and potential utilisation of the gym. The Club's representatives explained that we were not currently in a position to increase utilisation of the facility as the wage cost would not be justified.

BGWLC's representatives then brought Mr Lock to see the gym in person, with a view to establishing the specialised and essentially non-commercial nature of the facility. BGWLC's representatives confirmed that we would be interested in negotiating a lease.

2015

In January, BGWLC sent a development proposal to Howard Lock and Nasim Ahmed (LBTH Third Sector Team).

BGWLC's representatives met with Howard Lock and Nasim Ahmed in February 2015. Some basic measurements were taken and the process of issuing a lease was discussed.

Mr Lock and Mr Ahmed outlined the steps that BGWLC would have to take in order to be considered fit tenants - in particular:

- Establishing a formal constitution (ideally as a registered charity)
- Demonstrating provision of a community service
- Demonstrating means to pay rent

At the meeting, BGWLC's representatives confirmed that we would be interested in negotiating a lease. BGWLC were also advised to look into grant funding programmes, including MSG.

BGWLC undertook to investigate these steps. The club's representatives worked with Gemma Cossins of the Tower Hamlets CVS to find out more about charitable structures and registration and the possible funding sources available. Eventually, the club chose to incorporate as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation in order to limit trustee liability and make the club better able to take on a lease.

BGWLC was awarded a grant under the MSG program in July to continue offering an expanded range of classes – both open to all and some targeted to specific populations (specifically Over-55s, Women and Young People.) The grant awarded was £56,880 (£18,960 per annum)

BGWLC formally applied for charitable status in August and was officially added to the register as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation in September.

BGWLC requested meetings with LBTH in October 2015 (when we were informed that responsibility had passed to Steve Cooper) and also in February and April 2016. These meetings did not take place.

2016

In September 2016 BGWLC's representatives met with Steve Cooper and Victor Oshinowo.

Mr Cooper explained the process by which leases were being evaluated and we discussed what this would likely entail in terms of the club's premises.

Mr Cooper told us a valuation would be conducted and lease terms offered in a matter of weeks. He believed that we were likely to be offered a market rent, with the possibility of offsetting it via future grant programmes (such as MSG.)

BGWLC's representatives explained that we had concerns about the idea of committing to a full market rent against the possibility of a future grant. However, we were also clear that we were willing to consider an offer of lease on its own merits.

Only now - in February 2017 - have we been notified of the valuation which Tower Hamlets council intends to apply. No actual lease terms have yet been offered.

BGWLC have always been willing to negotiate a lease and to pay rent.

We are a small charity, we have no professional administrators - the only paid staff are the coaches directly responsible for delivering our service to the public. We have relied upon the council's representatives to deal with us openly and directly but for whatever reason, we have been left in the dark about a process which now threatens the very existence of our organisation.

We would welcome the chance to work with the council to put our organisation and its clients on a more secure footing.

Regards,

Neal Harvey (Trustee)
Martin Bass (Trustee)

on behalf of

The Trustees of Bethnal Green Weightlifting Club.