

# Birmingham International Student Homes

Annual Review  
2020

Supportive

Caring

Safe

Friendly

Comfortable





# Retiring Chairman's Message

It is with much sadness that I pen my final message for the BISH annual review.

We look back on a tumultuous year with much uncertainty about what the future holds. Yet there is no doubt whatsoever about our purpose which remains unchanged.

Our foundation is a belief that the route to global peace and love must encompass bringing more knowledge and knowhow to many countries, some of which do not have the centres of expertise that we have in the UK. We seek to provide a safe, secure and affordable Home Away from Home for overseas students and people developing themselves. We aim that in a new culture and different language they can feel loved and cared for. As we are taught, we seek to care for the "Stranger in the Midst".



Our financial year (September to August) started well. Demand for secure accommodation, whilst slightly off the record peak of the previous years, remained strong. In late autumn 2019 we saw a significant reduction in people coming to us from countries which had a new virus. By February this Covid-19 had hit Britain and those who were able, flew home before lockdown. We were forced into emergency action requiring everyone from residents to staff to think and act differently.

The response has been amazing and it reflects well the values and ethos of everyone staying and working here. As I retire after 14 years in the chair, I look back with enormous pleasure and thanks to so many. Being in the chair has been such an honour and privilege.

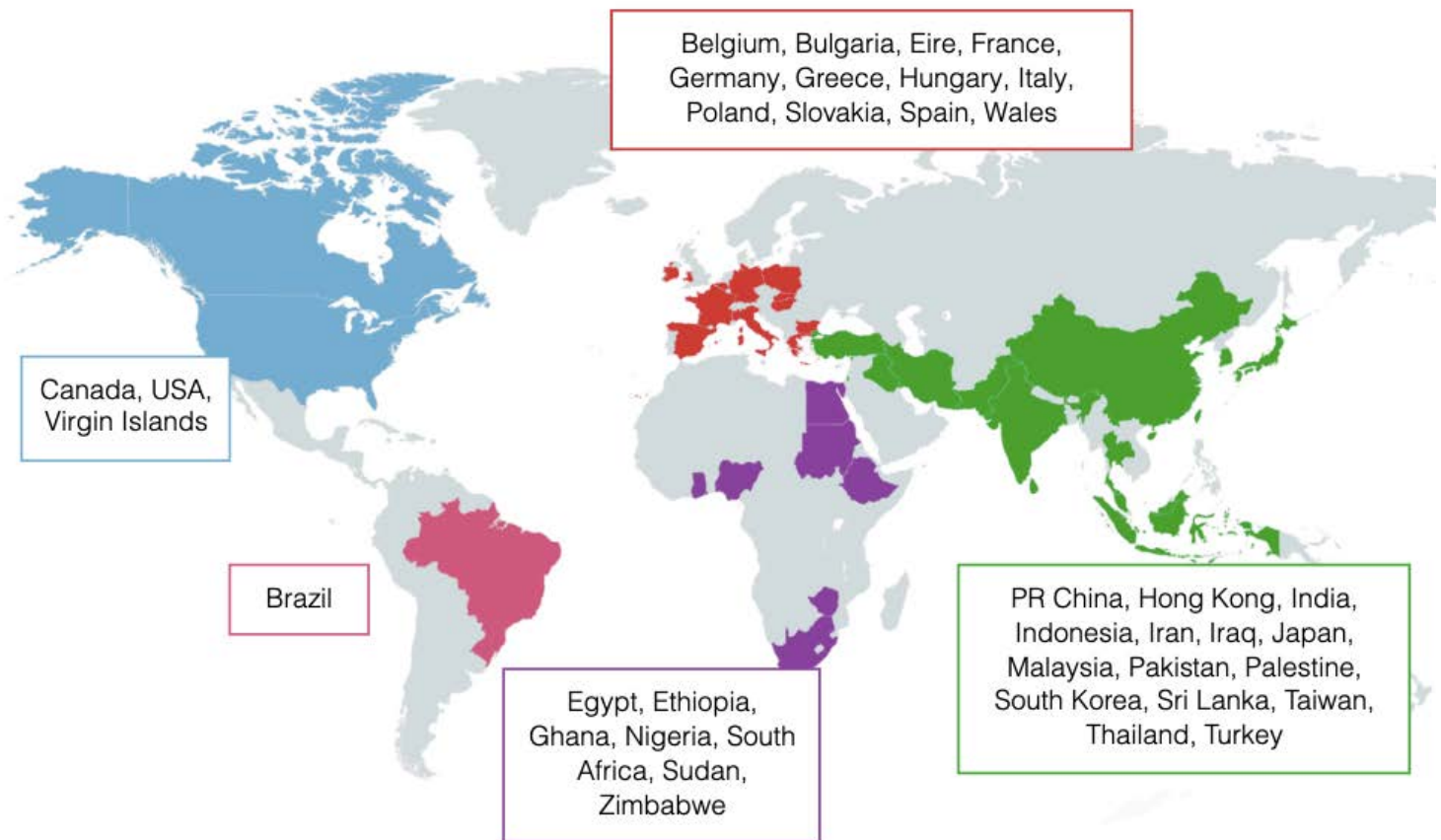
The Board have unanimously elected Andrew Steel to be my successor and he comes to us as a member of Four Oaks Methodist Church and as a very successful and experienced senior director in industry. He takes over a difficult situation. The BISH that comes out of this crisis, like most organisations, will be very different. Significant change will be required for us to continue in our quest to further the development of overseas friends.

In this review may I please welcome Andrew wholeheartedly and wish him and you all the best of fortune as you make a new future.

Lawrie Rumens



# Where are our residents from?



The first quarter of the 2019-20 financial year had started with occupancy at a good level but not quite at the level of the previous, very successful year. A wide spread of nationalities were living with us along with the potential of more diversity with the cohort of new residents who traditionally arrive in the new year. However, the onset of Covid-19 in the Far East and its subsequent spread to Europe halted this influx as reported elsewhere in this Review. We were delighted, though, that we did have for the first time in over two years, residents from Ghana, Malaysia, Nigeria, Slovakia and South Africa staying with us.

Our flats in Asbury House continued to be in demand by families and we were delighted to again have a year when children's voices could be heard in the building.

## Our residents

In the past year we have seen:



38 nations



173 residents

90 at Asbury  
83 at Wesley



18 children



# Lawrie Rumens retires as Chair of BISH

In 2006, Sue Balmer, a member at Solihull Methodist Church, approached Lawrie to ask if he would consider joining the Board of BISH. "We don't want you to do anything, just be a voice with business experience at our meetings" she said. Lawrie agreed and it was very soon after that the then Chair, a Methodist minister, was posted to the West Country and announced that he had to stand down. There was a remarkable shortage of volunteers for the role and it was whilst driving home with Sue from the next Board meeting that Lawrie heard himself say "If we are stuck I will act as temporary Chair until a proper appointment is made". By the time he had realised this was not the most sensible thing to have said, he was in the role and so began fourteen years of service in this position.

Lawrie had inherited a different world to today. There were two houses each with its own separate identity, each with a warden and support staff, each with its own accounts, with different property stewards from the Methodist District and totally separate and different procedures and processes and no visibility of room availability between them. With little appreciation of the market place and growing importance and growth of various universities and student accommodation in Birmingham, room rentals were under-priced and there was little money to invest in improvements and changes. It was not a surprise that room occupancy was not good. Management was by committee with no one managing the whole.

Lawrie says that at that time, new student accommodation being built had such very good standards and facilities and thus it was decided to move steadily to be one company with a clear and public view of its role and place in the market, generating sufficient cash to progressively upgrade its own accommodation. Survival was not possible by selling low grade rooms at a reduced price.

Lawrie goes on to describe how the business evolved.

"So was born a new approach, understanding that what our overseas students valued most was not the latest facilities, but a safe and secure environment and a friendly community with the care and support you might expect from a Church charity. That is, BISH was a caring, people-based charity not just selling rooms. The parent church organisations had no money to invest in the charity's future and there were little self-generated funds to survive a major crisis let alone invest in the future".

"We sought to encapsulate this ethos in our lasting motto "A Home away from Home", a simple statement to which every person involved with the charity could relate and prospective residents might find compelling. It was vital that in fulfilling this mission BISH had to operate as one company with two houses. We had to disband the complex committee structure which inhibited management at the coalface and we had to understand the market sufficiently to properly price our offering to create our own reserves to fund proper investment plans. Progress was slow especially when, early on, one warden became seriously ill, eventually sadly, having to retire on medical grounds".



# Lawrie Rumens retires as Chair of BISH



the true meaning of creating a “Home away from Home”. What a joy it has been to work with every one of them”.

“It was not easy of course, but over time we were able to increase room rates to a market level. With tight cash management we managed to record regular surpluses enabling upgrading of all facilities and the creation of reserves for which today we are so grateful. Without recourse to the Church or the property owners, we invested in the necessary, such as complete rewiring and replacing the old boiler systems; in the desirable, like installing double glazing throughout (140 windows at Asbury Overseas House alone), high standard carpeting throughout and new modern kitchens and bathrooms; and fulfilling those things our guests told us were important, like high grade internet access and WIFI throughout and the conversion of more and more rooms to give en-suite facilities”.

“The move to dedicated maintenance resulted in a considerable cost saving and allowed us to respond to residents issues quicker and embark on redecoration of rooms on a regular basis”.

“Of course there were hiccups along the way, however, each year has seen a consolidation of our place in the market, as the place where people from overseas can come to know that away from home they will find all round support that cares and will go the extra mile. We have created communities where people care for each other and make international friendships that will continue through all their lives. Every year has seen babies born into our community thrilling everyone. We have made a place where people from overseas can come, be safe, be happy and focus on growing their knowledge to take back home to share with their own peoples”.

“What a complete privilege it has been to be a part of this team and see at first hand the results of offering the hand of friendship and love to people from overseas”.

“So we come to today. How we are challenged. When the COVID-19 virus spread round the world, no one could have predicted that universities would shut campuses, that people from overseas would be barred, that our market would so collapse. With our premises only half full for the time being we are strongly challenged. How good that over the years whilst investing strongly in improvements, we have been able to create the financial reserves to continue securely in our mission to create for overseas students, a Home Away from Home”.





# Community Sponsorship Scheme

## The Role BISH played in the Community Sponsorship Scheme



In the latter part of 2015, many of the News items on TV centred on the internal warfare in Syria along with the mass movement of Syrian nationals into UNHCR camps in other countries and the migration of refugees of several different nationalities to a number of the Mediterranean countries and islands. Vivid pictures of the plight of these peoples led the Trustees of BISH to ask themselves if they could help in any way. The Government also announced that the UK would take a number of refugees and give them homes in Birmingham.

At this time, Rev. David Butterworth, the Mission in the Economy Officer of the Methodist Birmingham District had become very interested in a new scheme to bring refugees to the UK called Community Sponsorship of Refugees. This scheme originated in Canada, was very successful and was based on private communities or groups providing homes and care for refugees and would be outside of the Government's pledge to bring a set number of refugees to the UK.

Following agreement that the Birmingham District would seek to be one of the pioneers of this scheme in the UK, BISH agreed that a family could be housed in a flat in Asbury House. There followed two years of meetings and planning with the Home Office, Birmingham City Council and volunteers who would form the wrap around support group for the family. Fund raising was carried out to provide the £9000 necessary to support the family until they were able to apply for financial help under government schemes. Sue Ford, who worked with David became Project Manager responsible for helping the family and coordinating other volunteer supporters

February 2018 saw the arrival of Eyad and his wife Ghenwah along with their son Rami and daughter Lyan. Eyad's shop, his parents' home and his brother's factory had been destroyed by bombing in Syria and he, Ghenwah and Rami fled the country in 2013, making their way to Jordan. Lyan was born there.

The family lived in the flat for two years, the time stipulated by the scheme and left to live in a nearby house in early 2020. The following is their description of living at BISH given in an interview shortly before they left.

"We were scared on our journey to Britain as we did not have good language, we could not speak English. We were frightened that we would not fit in, we did not know if people would like us. We had some idea about Birmingham, we had been given a leaflet, but we knew nothing about BISH where we would be living".

On coming into Birmingham airport, Rami did not know where he was. There was just lots of grass and many cars driving on the wrong side. Once in the terminal, he saw David, who along with Sue was smiling and the family were relieved at the kindness shown. Following a minibus journey to Asbury House the family were shown to their flat. At first they did not like it. Their thoughts were that it was too small, did not have its own washing machine and there was no private space.



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# Community Sponsorship Scheme



They liked their neighbour in the next flat who was very kind to them and they felt safe, so much so that they did not need to lock their door. In Syria, their house was of a different style, large and spacious with most rooms being tiled. Ghenwah described it as being more like houses in Spain, Croatia and Italy.

The family did not feel settled for about a year. Much of their concern centred around the flat commenting that the wardrobe did not have sufficient space for clothing, the kitchen was small with no space for a microwave and that the children did not have enough room to play in

their bedroom. When venturing out, the transport systems were totally different to anything they had experienced before and it took some time to understand the money when shopping.

English language was a major problem, particularly when visiting Rami's school to discuss his progress with teachers. Eyad and Ghenwah were unable to help with any work at home and were unable to understand how his education was progressing. This left them very worried. In the second year, Rami's English improved and he was able to help with discussions with the teachers, but he was not always able to be present due to appointment and class timings, so whilst the situation had improved, it was not always completely satisfactory.

Ghenwah explained that all was not so difficult. BISH helped a lot with making friends. She met ladies from the area who were associated with different churches, some of whom came to Asbury House. Also the family got to know other families from flats and Marion, in particular, helped with shopping and the language on many occasions. The diversity of residents at Asbury was welcomed and important. The family were introduced to other Syrian refugees in Birmingham who were among the first Syrians to come to Birmingham as part of the UK Government scheme. The diversity of Birmingham was also important to the family.

Rami made friends with many of the other children living at Asbury House, playing football, riding bikes outside and playing hide and seek in the house were some of the favourite things. Lyan went to nursery but had difficulties with language but teachers allowed her to play with toys. There was no provision for language teaching. She was starting to progress as the family were coming to the end of their stay.

The family were delighted that a house had become available through the Bourneville Trust, not far from Asbury House. They felt like Birmingham was their home and that they have a future here. They have a desire to return to Syria to see family but will only do that when it is safe to do so. They are now happy as would anyone moving from a different country and culture.

At the end of the interview, Rami wanted to say the following.

"I am now doing bigger homework. There are times tables, divisions and I am great at maths. In my first book, there was lots of red and pink but in my second there were few crosses and now in my third there are only one or two. At first my writing was very big, we do PE and dance and I like Aston Villa.

Following the interview the family moved into their new home and are happy. Eyad has a job and they have bought a small car.

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# Covid-19

## Paul Edgerton, General Manager relates how Covid-19 affected BISH and continues to do so.

How many of us could have predicted how much Covid-19 and the lockdown announced by the Prime Minister on 23<sup>rd</sup> March would change all our lives?

As soon as the lockdown was announced, the impact on BISH was dramatic. Those residents that were able to get flights home left our houses, saying a quick and often tearful farewell to friends.

People that had booked accommodation with us got in touch to say they would regrettably need to cancel their bookings until such time as the situation was resolved.

Our houses, normally lively, vibrant places, became much quieter overnight. Our priority suddenly became one of ensuring that we provided a safe environment for the international students and their families remaining with us, and how we could meet whatever challenges faced us over an unknown period of time.

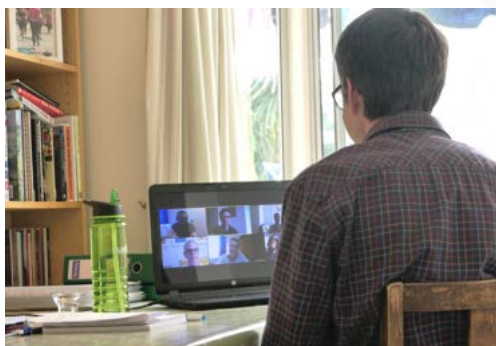
Just as with so many hundreds of thousands of workers up and down the country, our domestic and maintenance staff was placed on furlough. Those staff that were able to work from home did so.

We all needed to adapt quickly to the 'new normal.'

My deputy Chris and I came in to carry out essential health and safety tasks on a regular basis. We flushed taps in unoccupied rooms and flats to safeguard against legionella. We tested fire alarms, emergency lights, produced signage and performed sundry other tasks to ensure the physical well-being of our residents. We also took on simple, but nonetheless important tasks such as replenishing stocks of toilet rolls, soap and other items. During the early stages of the pandemic, we underwent the difficult task of sourcing suitable PPE, hand sanitiser and the like for use when we were working at the houses and in readiness for when our staff would return at some future date.

We held 'Zoom' meetings with residents of both houses to ensure they were able to raise any queries with us, but also just to give people an opportunity to reach out to their fellow housemates and say hello. Zoom has also proved invaluable in enabling BISH management to communicate issues of importance with the BISH Board of Trustees.

In June, I purchased a large number of colouring books, pencils and wax crayons for the children at Asbury House in an effort to give their parents 5 minutes' rest! These were gladly received.



On a final note, I really must pay tribute to the residents of both Asbury and Wesley. Throughout this incredibly trying time they have amazed me at the level of mutual support they have given to each other. Residents set up cleaning rotas to ensure that communal kitchens were kept hygienic in the absence of our regular service. The demands placed on them by the virus created strong bonds. New friendships were formed.

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# Life at BISH



"I am sitting in a Hercules airplane, listening to a loud music and thinking of what happened during last days and months, thinking of what just occurred to me on last four weeks ... I was coming back from an expedition in Antarctica! I travelled thousands of miles to spend almost one month in King George Island as a researcher! Four wonderful weeks in a frozen island collecting seaweed samples, processing them, recording data besides mingling with a bunch of amazing Argentinian people, listening to their Cumbia music everywhere even in microbiology laboratory, baking bread, sharing Mate tea ...

I am on the way back to my home. HOME it is rather an abstract concept for me now, as I can call home an apartment which I rented just 4 months ago. Before that, Asbury was my home for almost 5 years. A room for 5 years was my safest and most peaceful place in the world and without any doubt I spent the best time of my whole life in that room. Room number 204C!

That big window, those beautiful colourful views in different seasons, those trees that I was watching their growth during those years, the sound of leaves in the wind, moving white clouds in blue sky on those lazy Sunday afternoons, that colourful skyline at sunset time, fireworks, church bell sounds ... I even had a little garden behind those windows. I found a lot of new friends in that lovely kitchen simply by offering a piece of cake or asking a food recipe.. and then it was just beginning of a friendship, short but enjoyable! I arrived to Asbury as a not enough confident student, I grown up there and I left it as a postdoctoral researcher but of course with tears falling down from my cheeks. Asbury was something beyond a student accommodation for me! It was HOME!

We are about to land in Buenos Aires, I need to sit tight ..."

The base that we have been there (orange blocks in images) called "Carlini Base" on Potter Cove, King George Island in Antarctica.

There is no need to say that I missed Asbury so much :)

Kind regards,

Fatemeh

# Life at BISH



## Muhammad

My name is Muhammad Ali and I came to the UK from Pakistan with my wife in March, 2018 for a period of 2 years to work as a doctor in anaesthetics and intensive care medicine at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham. The whole of the BISH staff is awesome and always there to help. They know each and every resident individually and do everything possible to give the residents a home like environment. The security and safety at Asbury House made my wife feel at ease and will always be very special for us because we had our first child born here. The amazing memories with our child (Hussain) playing and enjoying life here at BISH that will always be cherished.

All in all, I can say that BISH has given us a lot in terms of safe residence, comfortable living and countless memories. I cannot thank them enough for their continuous help and support throughout our stay. Thank you very much.



## Ruda

My name is Ruda Mvundura from Zimbabwe. I came to the UK in 2019 and I was accommodated at Wesley International House also known as BISH. My housemates and I became "bishes" a name we gave to ourselves as we were from different backgrounds, ethnicities and faith.

Being at BISH made me feel at home. I always had someone to talk to, someone to play uno and tennis with and then we would all get together to share food and company at the bbqs. The whole team that maintains BISH were so friendly including Paul and Chris who were very supportive.

Now that I have left I have so many beautiful memories of my first year in the UK and BISH my home away from home.



## Lukasz

My name is Lukasz. I came to Birmingham in 2019 and stayed at Asbury Overseas House for 6 months as a visiting researcher at the University of Birmingham.

Although living alone was a bit difficult in the very beginning, I enjoyed cooking and catching up with my neighbours in the evening in the cosy communal kitchen. I especially liked the Asbury party where all the residents prepared a traditional meal from their home countries. So once again, big thanks to everyone I met at Asbury in 2019 as it was you who made my stay memorable.



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# Our team



## Welcome to our new Chairman

BISH is delighted to introduce and welcome Andrew Steel as the new Chairman of the Board and as a Trustee.

Andrew is a Chartered Engineer who was born in Sutton Coldfield in the early 1960's and has lived there for the majority of his life. He has been married to his wife, Sarah, for more than 35 years and they have 4 children. The oldest works for an American software company, the second oldest is the Rector of All Saints Allersley in Coventry, the third is

a nurse currently working in Cardiff and the fourth is an engineering apprentice. Andrew started his career after graduating in Mechanical Engineering from Loughborough University, working for a major PLC in the engineering sector and subsequently returned to the Birmingham area to work for a family run business in the late 1980's.

In 1993 Andrew, along with his business partner, started a metal fabrication business supplying shop equipment to major high street retailers. During this time, he graduated with an MBA from Aston University. He now owns and runs a bespoke metal fabrication company supplying a very diverse number of markets including specialist access equipment, high end shop fittings and contract chrome plating.

Away from work, Andrew sings with Birmingham Festival Choral Society and he is a member of their committee. He is also a keen follower of motor sport having held a race national A licence and now enjoys spectating rather than taking part – he quips that he is not brave enough now to take to the track.

Andrew looks forward to being part of the future development of BISH and serving as a trustee.



## Julia Cruickshank takes up a new role in BISH

We welcomed Julia who joined BISH in July 2020 on a part time basis to help us with some of the effects the Covid -19 pandemic has had on our business. Her role is to work with BISH staff to increase BISH's marketing resource, awareness levels of BISH and populating the new website.

Julia started her career as a YTS sales administrator in the engineering field and then moved to the Motor Trade in administrative and sales roles for 17 years. She then took 6 months off, travelling around the USA, visiting 42 states and clocking more than 20,000 miles before returning to the UK. Julia then began 12 years of employment in Estate Agency Sales, based primarily in Selly Oak carrying out property valuation, dealing with investors and parent buyers for student properties.

Julia is now in her fourth year at Savekers Solutions in a sales administration and marketing role, once again within the engineering environment. A major part of her work for BISH has been the upgrading of the website for re-launch in November 2020 with updated photos and content, which will be followed by improved presence on social media sites to improve engagement with the international community and to draw traffic to the new website. Outside of work, Julia's main interest is reading with Stephen King being her favourite author.

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# Our team

## Directors

### Chairman

Andrew Steele

### Hon. Treasurer

Peter Johansen

### Company Secretary

Carolyn Humpherson

Robert Dauncey

Dr Stuart Burgess

Malcolm Evans



Paul



Chris



Anita



Gemma



Monika



Elzbieta



Ewa

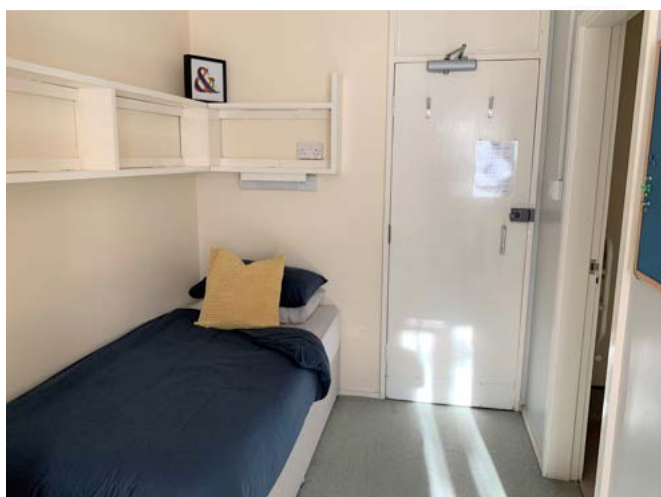


Errol



Clive

The Trustees would like to express their thanks to the team who have continued to work at times under the difficult circumstances that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought us.



Wesley room



Asbury flat



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# Future developments and finance

In February 2020 it became clear that the Covid-19 pandemic would arrive in the UK and BISH residents started to return home while they could or decided not to join new post-graduate courses. In March 2020 the UK government introduced a national lockdown and the local universities decided to close their on-campus facilities. Very quickly those who could return home did so, some leaving their belongings for when they could return. At BISH, we were left with about half of the normal number of residents – too many to close one house and a long way from financial break even.

In the short term our financial position was alleviated by government support through its furlough scheme. Most staff, with the exception of our General Manager and his Deputy who attended both houses every day, were put on furlough for their safety and to protect those guests remaining in residence from external infection. There was a major exercise in sourcing the provision of PPE and new safety procedures for residents were introduced.

It soon became clear that the situation would not be short-lived and to preserve financial reserves the investment in the stable block at Wesley House was suspended indefinitely and then to be reviewed when the situation normalised. This project had reached a convenient point of being completely ready for tender before it was stopped.

Given the uncertain condition of our traditional student market and the long disruption in University education, the Board took prompt action to save costs and begun a strategic review of the market and its longer term future. Among these actions they reduced working hours, created a new part time position of marketing manager, to increase the number of people recommending our services and to seek new opportunities to fulfil our charitable purpose and stopped all unnecessary expenditure. The Trustees continue to meet monthly to review the situation and recommend actions to preserve residents and staff safety, along with developing a secure business future.

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Expenditure on property during the year ended 31 August 2020 totalled £66,877. This included work on kitchen and bathroom refurbishments prior to the pandemic, essential works generated from the quinquennial report on Wesley House, work on external fire escapes, roof repairs and plumbing works to prevent legionella. Some 149 new smoke and heat detectors were replaced.

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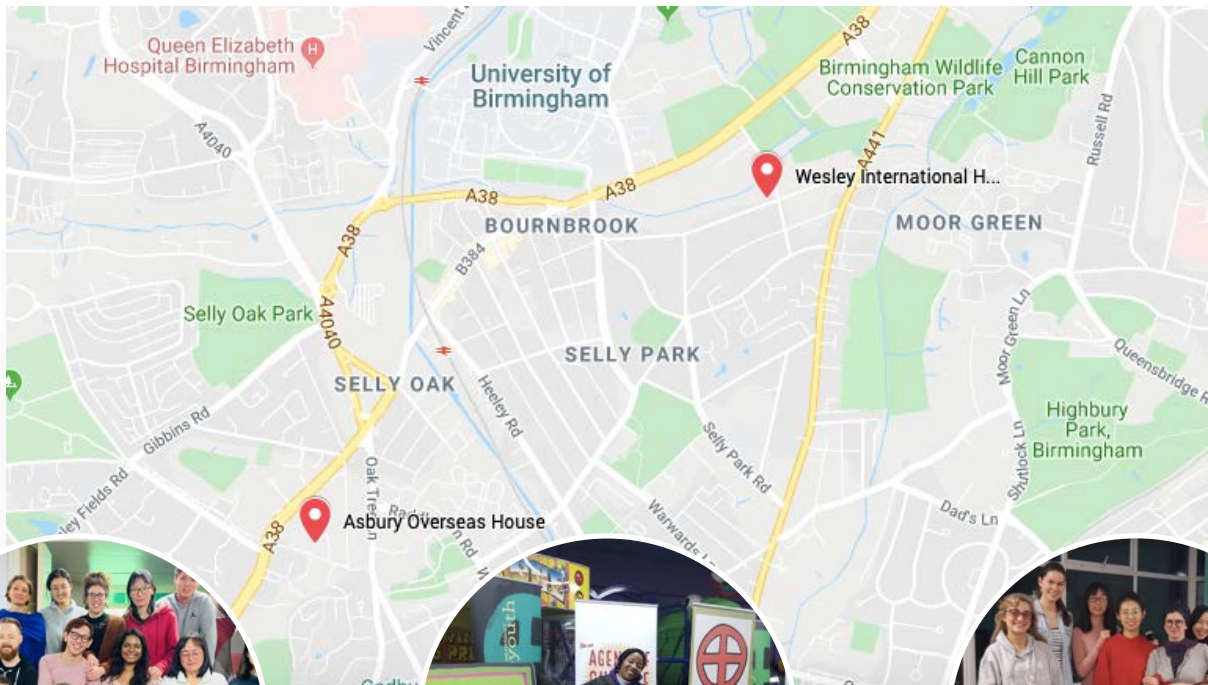
## Donation

BISH was delighted to receive a large donation of £3000 during the year. Consideration of how to best use this money is currently under way.

*Birmingham International Student Homes' financial year runs from 1st September to 31st August. A complete copy of the statutory accounts can be obtained by writing to the Company Secretary at 52 Oakfield Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham, B29 7EQ*

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# Where to find us



## Get in touch

We promise that staying with BISH for your education in Birmingham will be life enriching, providing an experience that will never be forgotten.

Our homes are in easy reach of the universities in Birmingham with short rail and bus connections to the City Centre.

For flats, double and single rooms at Asbury Overseas House and for single rooms at Wesley International House, get in touch;



+44 121 472 0109



enquiries@bish.org.uk

We have a new website!

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

Company limited by guarantee no. England 4428382

A Home Away From Home