

Housing and Environment Scrutiny Commission

Tuesday 23 April 2019
7.00 pm

Ground Floor Meeting Room G01A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

Membership

Councillor Helen Dennis (Chair)
Councillor Graham Neale (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Paul Fleming
Councillor Sunny Lambe
Councillor Hamish McCallum
Councillor Margy Newens
Councillor Ian Wingfield
Cris Claridge
Ina Negoita

Reserves

Councillor Adele Morris
Councillor Radha Burgess
Councillor Karl Eastham
Councillor Tom Flynn
Councillor Jon Hartley

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Contact Julie Timbrell on 020 7525 0514 or email: julie.timbrell@southwark.gov.uk

Members of the committee are summoned to attend this meeting

Eleanor Kelly

Chief Executive

Date: 15 April 2019.



Housing and Environment Scrutiny Commission

Tuesday 23 April 2019

7.00 pm

Ground Floor Meeting Room G01A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

Order of Business

Item No.	Title	Page No.
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PART A - OPEN BUSINESS

1. APOLOGIES

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT.

In special circumstances, an item of business may be added to an agenda within 5 clear working days of the meeting.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

Members to declare any interests and dispensations in respect of any item of business to be considered at this meeting.

4. MINUTES

1 - 9

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the open section of the meeting on 17 December 2018.

5. EMPTY HOMES

10 - 12

The draft Empty Homes – Interim Report is enclosed.

6. COMMUNITY ENERGY

The draft review report is to follow.

7. RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT

13 - 22

The item will be focused on evaluating the process to date and learning lessons for the next stage. Please find enclosed an evaluation of the resident involvement quality review co-design process.

DISCUSSION OF ANY OTHER OPEN ITEMS AS NOTIFIED AT THE START OF THE MEETING.

PART B - CLOSED BUSINESS

DISCUSSION OF ANY CLOSED ITEMS AS NOTIFIED AT THE START OF THE MEETING AND ACCEPTED BY THE CHAIR AS URGENT.

Date: 15 April 2019

EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

The following motion should be moved, seconded and approved if the sub-committee wishes to exclude the press and public to deal with reports revealing exempt information:

“That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1-7, Access to Information Procedure rules of the Constitution.”



Housing and Environment Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Housing and Environment Scrutiny Commission held on Monday 17 December 2018 at 7.15 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G01A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Dennis (Chair)
Councillor Graham Neale
Councillor Sunny Lambe
Councillor Hamish McCallum
Councillor Margy Newens
Councillor Ian Wingfield

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Cllr Richard Livingston Environment, Cabinet member for Transport Management and Air Quality
Cllr Leo Pollak Social Regeneration, Cabinet member for Great Estates and New Council Homes

OFFICER SUPPORT: Martin Kovats, Community Projects Manager
Ian Young, Departmental Finance Manager
Louise Turff, Homeownership Services Manager, Finance and Governance
Michael O'Driscoll, Contract Manager, Lifts & electrical.
Tom Vosper, Strategic Project Manager, district heating lead
Julie Timbrell, scrutiny project manager

1. APOLOGIES

Cllr Paul Fleming, Cris Claridge and Ina Negoita sent apologies. Ina sent a deputy to contribute to the roundtable discussion on behalf of the Homeowners Council.

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT.

There were none.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

Councillor Margy Newens declared she was a shareholder in SE24.

4. MINUTES

Minutes from 17 October 2018 were agreed. The follow up actions will be requested in advance of the next meeting.

5. SOUTHWARK'S SUSTAINABILITY PLANS

The chair introduced the session by referring to the council plan commitment to: "support the creation of community led sustainable energy projects on estates to help residents reduce their energy bills" and the Commissions role in contributing to policy development.

A member asked about the GLA initiative to set up an energy company and the possible benefits of economies of scale. The GLA sent a short briefing, however this did not touch on this. More information will be sort on this.

Stuart Robinson-Marshall, Head of Sustainability & Business Development, Environment & Leisure presented on Southwark Council's environmental sustainability plans, with reference to the briefing paper circulated in advance. This is working towards the borough being carbon neutral by 2050 and the council by 2025.

6. COMMUNITY ENERGY: COUNCIL PLAN AND COMMUNITY PILOTS

Martin Kovats, Community Projects Manager, Housing and Modernisation provided a briefing which gave an overview of the three pilots, which are in development to take forward the council plan commitment. The chair invited him to present and he introduced the council's work on community energy by saying the council has a large housing stock with considerable opportunities for generating community energy. The management of this is centralised, however the council is committed to maximising community engagement.

Frequently community energy focuses on solar; however the other opportunity is district heating and most of the estates currently utilise this in some form, with hot water pumped in. There is currently a review of this. As this is still in the early stages it will be a while before this will report back on opportunities.

Currently the council has low technical capacity to evaluate the viability of solar projects; the pilots aim to increase this. There is already a large solar array on Four Squares, which the council is evaluating.

The Community Projects Manager referred to the briefing that outlined the three pilots: Haddonhall; Juniper House, and Brenchley Gardens. He explained that the pilots are

working in very different ways. Brenchley Gardens is investigating a variety of community energy initiatives. Haddonhall is working with South East London Community Energy Company (SELCE) and has recently received a grant to do a feasibility study. Juniper House TRAs intention is to install a solar array using existing capital of £30,000 from the previous housing cooperative which ran the estate.

Juniper House has had the most engagement with officers. This has focused on trying to resolve how to share the financial benefits of installing solar panels with all Juniper House residents equitably. Juniper House TRA's aspiration is for the solar energy to be used to power the communal energy needs of the estate and for this to lead to reduced leasehold and rent charges. However this is problematic as although tenants and leaseholders/homeowners receive a separately itemised bill for communal energy, the calculations are done differently. For leaseholder/home owners this is done based on the estate, but tenant's charges are aggregated across the borough.

The pilots are currently being evaluated by BRE Group. They have also been asked to advise the council on suitable criteria to evaluate future projects.

RESOLVED

Officers will provide the evaluation of Four Squares solar project when ready.

7. COMMUNITY ENERGY PILOTS

The chair invited Dr Giovanna Speciale; Chief Executive Officer of South East London Community Energy (SELCE) to provide an overview of community led energy models with input from Afsheen Kabir Rashid, Repowering London and SE24.

Dr Giovanna Speciale explained that community energy companies like SELCE, SE24 and Repowering London are social enterprises, usually powered by volunteers, most of whom want a socially just transition to a low carbon economy, powered by renewable energy, where people in fuel poverty are helped to reduce their bills. SE24 is the most local company and almost solely volunteer run, whereas SELCE and Repowering London have been operating longer, employ workers and operate across South East London and the capital respectively.

SE24 explained that they have primarily worked locally in the charitable sector, with churches and community centres, however new funding means they will also be working with social housing associations.

Community Energy companies use a similar model, which usually use solar in a suitable location, often in partnership with local residents and stakeholders, such as the Haddonhall TMO. Once feasibility has been established the next step is to raise investment funds by a stock offer to buy equity. Local residents are encouraged to invest. The resulting capital enables the purchase of solar panels. Once installed these provide a revenue stream through energy sold to the site at a cheaper rate and electricity sold to the grid, making use of feed in tariffs. This generates enough money to pay both a dividend to stock owners, at a small social rate of return, and a surplus that is reinvested back into the local community.

SELCE have installed 7 solar arrays across seven schools in Greenwich; each school will reduce carbon by 300,000 metric tons over the lifetime plus save the individual schools

£300,000 each. In addition create a pool of £100,000 is being raised, which is being used to reduced the energy bills of people in fuel poverty.

The model saves carbon and energy. It is also a 'win win' business model: it is self financing, local residents make a small social rate of return, it lowers energy and carbon, and it works to alleviate fuel poverty. Critically it creates community engagement, and creates 'buy in' for other social and environmental initiatives. Previous projects have run energy cafes, worked with low income parents to reduce energy consumption and save money, and help gain funds for grants to carry out insulation for individuals – for example loft insulation and new boilers for low income homeowners.

The surplus generated is now less with lower Feed in Tariffs (FiT); and will decrease further when these end in April 2019. This will mean that the sale of electricity to the site will need go up; although savings will still be significant – for example a £200 per year saving on service charges will make a big difference to people living on the bread line. It is also likely that more attention will need to be given to the technical analysis of the site to maximise the return.

The Community Energy companies said that they are on a race to install and register as it is possible that current sites under deliberation (such as Haddonhall and Juniper House) will be allowed to pre registrar, and make use of the current preferential Feed in Tariffs, if the project is completed by the end of 2019.

Afsheen Kabir Rashid, Repowering London, added that Community Energy usually utilises solar energy as this is a tangible benefit and one of the best forms of green energy in the city, however the environmental and social outcomes go beyond this. Tackling fuel poverty is a key outcome. The other benefit is the inclusivity and community ownership generated via the cooperative model; which allows an equal voice to anybody with a share to decide how the community energy, and associated surplus, is controlled, managed and utilised. The local residents decide how the community benefit will be used. The solar kit is a hook to get people involved in the other issues that are needed to transition and create an energy system that works for people.

Haddonhall TMO explained that the local residents were keen to use solar however they did not have the technical expertise so they asked SELCE to do an initial evaluation. The TMO have recently been awarded a grant from the GLA to do a technical mapping of the site to assess its feasibility. The initiative will be working on both installing solar and also reducing residents energy costs via an energy café providing advice over a tea and cake.

Juniper House Rob Kenyon, Secretary, Juniper House TRA explained that the TRA has the capital available to invest in an array of solar. This is money set aside for this purpose from the former housing cooperative. The challenge is sharing the benefits with residents equitably; this has proved to be a stumbling block over the last two years. Although all residents (both council tenant and leaseholders) receive an itemised bill with communal energy consumption, this is calculated differently: leaseholders are charged for the energy consumed on the particular estate, whereas tenant charges are an aggregate of all estates. This means that while the council can potentially reduce the leaseholders' bills to take account of savings provided by use of solar energy generated and used at Juniper House, its current billing arrangements would not allow the same saving to be passed onto council tenants.

The TRA Secretary said that unless tenants are treated the same as leaseholders it is hard to see how this initiative will move forward as the TRA need an equitable outcome;

this is both a stipulation on the capital being made available for this project and also a tangible benefit is needed to get buy in from local residents. He also emphasised the importance of a culture of partnership work across the board with tenants and council to work on initiatives such as this. His primary aim is to get clarity on this so the scheme can go ahead. He said this will be an issue for other initiatives. The other challenge is raising the capital – Juniper House has this, however other schemes will not. Martin Hughes, another representative from Juniper House, explained he has a technical background and he was confident that this is a viable project and advised pre-registration.

Brenchley Gardens has 95 homes about equally split between leaseholders and tenants. It is financially strong with high levels of tenant participation. The homes are located on large area of communal land. There are challenges; the homes are thin walled brick and hard to heat – there is fuel poverty. The estate has installed communal windows to reduce energy costs. They are looking at a number of different options:

- Roof Solar Panels;
- Green Roofs;
- Solar Powered Lighting
- Insulation to Blocks of Flats
- Composting (from flats)

They are keen to work with the council to reduce carbon consumption and save energy bills and gave assurances that they would a strong and reliable partner.

Cllr Leo Pollack commented that the council plan has a specific commitment and capital plan policy to enable community energy to be realised by residents to reduce energy bills. The wording was chosen to overcome some of the hurdles and technical problems that have hindered projects in the past. He said he was aware of the challenges regarding sharing the benefits equitably at Juniper House. He was encouraged by Brenchley Gardens wider look at energy and the Haddonhall scheme. He encouraged the pre-registration for FiT, and undertook that members would lobby government to allow this to happen.

He commented that the issues around service charges at Juniper House have wider implications for other estates schemes like this, and the existing protocols and the underlying principles would need to be assessed. This is complicated but not insurmountable; and the council will be looking at policy changes that are needed to deliver the saving to residents' energy bills that the council plan is committed to delivering. He suggested that Ian Young, Departmental Finance Manager comment at some stage on the policy and practical issues.

A Commission member on the planning committee commented that it is concerning that new developments coming to planning committee are not meeting carbon standards and having to offset. This includes council buildings. Getting new buildings right, as well as addressing legacy issues, is important; otherwise the council will not meet the 2025 or 2050 target. The legacy challenges are already large so the council ought to be getting it right on new developments. The cabinet member agreed this needs addressing and went on to comment that the standards for council buildings are high and there is currently a planned revisit of new build housing standards to raise these even higher and even towards passive house. It was noted that council is setting up our own construction company and this will provide an opportunity to improve our carbon and sustainability performance.

RESOLVED

Write to Cllr Jonson Situ regarding concerns about carbon performance of regeneration schemes generally, and new council buildings, in particular; to understand more about the issues and what is being done to tackle these.

8. REPOWERING LONDON

Afsheen Kabir Rashid, Chief Operating Officer, referred to the paper that Repowering London provided; 'Making Community Energy in Southwark'.

She explained that Repowering London started in Brixton where they pioneered the financial model; at this point she was working within the council as a sustainability officer and Lambeth was positioning itself as a cooperative council. In those days most solar schemes were in rural areas; so this was both an early urban scheme and also the first scheme on a social housing estate.

The early schemes raised capital through a community share offer; many of the people who brought the first shares were not expecting to see their money again, but wanted to make this happen. However it was a success and a year on many were surprised to see a cheque in the post. The model was based in Brixton and focused on ensuring that those residents who did not have the means to invest would see the benefits.

Most initial schemes used little of the electricity on site as there is only a limited amount that can be consumed in the day by the communal areas when solar power is being generated. The schemes were selling most of the electricity back to the grid as the local consumption was restricted to the communal areas and demand was limited. At the same time residents were paying 13p per unit of electricity, however the scheme was generating only 4p by selling to the grid. This seemed a flaw in the model; however to supply cheap energy directly to residents you have to be registered as an energy supplier and there are various regulations governing this. Repowering therefore had to think carefully about how to generate benefit on the estate to residents directly. The project engaged with residents to ask them by knocking on doors and holding events. A ring fenced community fund was created to enable local investment. The early models created a surplus to generate this: the costs were met; returns to investors were capped, and the extra enabled the creation of funds which were then spent on resident priorities.

Having both a cooperative in place locally, and a community pot of money, has provided additional leverage. This has enabled a number of schemes chosen by residents to be realised that combine alleviating poverty with reducing carbon. Energy Cafes work to reduce fuel poverty. A current scheme is working with 55 young people via an internship and mentoring programme which trains young people at risk of exclusion in community energy. This is an accredited programme, which came out of a demand from local parents on estates to provide something for young people.

Each year it gets tougher to make these schemes as the FiT has decreased, alongside a lack of national support and uncertainty. However London does now have a supportive Mayor which is helping and feasibility studies are being funded. Repowering London are looking to pre-register a number of schemes for FiT.

Afsheen was asked if Community Energy projects would be viable post FiT and she

responded that that they would through a combination of share offers, selling to the grid, grants and carbon offset funds. Currently the focus is largely on utilising sites where they can generate more electricity to sell on site so there has been an increased focus on leisure centres, schools and community centres. Some roofs are not suitable; we know what these are through experience. The price of solar installation is also coming down. The model will emerge post FiT as the market will respond.

Repowering London also has three trails looking at local electricity supply models. These are particularly focused on providing solar energy directly to residents in multiple occupancy communal housing; so this relates to the council commitment to reduce resident energy bills through community energy. The pilots are working with different partners; cooperative energy; EDF, and Verve, a technical partner looking at blockchain and peer to peer. These are all very technical and confidential at the moment. Repowering's aim is to safeguard the needs of residents and to attempt to provide solar energy directly and cheaply to residents. Two were part of sandbox trails which gives some flexibility with regulations; these are being scrutinised by Ofcom. Repowering hope that these trails can be utilised once the testing is finished, however no one silver bullet has emerged yet. She finished by urging people not to hold back as the asset will generate electricity and money. Keeping momentum is important; the solutions will emerge.

9. ROUNDTABLE

Members of the Commission, officers, community representatives, and stakeholders discussed how Community Energy could be best taken forward in Southwark. Sustainable Energy 24 (SE24) contributed to this item and provided a paper. The Mayor of London's office sent apologies and provided a comment on behalf of Shirley Rodrigues, Deputy Mayor for Environment and Energy; also attached.

SE24 reinforced the point made by Repowering London that there will be emerging business models post FiT, and that different sources such as grants will come into play. They noted that carbon offsets are a particular opportunity that is often underused by London boroughs; this is an area worth looking at.

SE24 recommended the council consider the benefits solar could bring from other parts of the borough estate; e.g. primary schools. Schools can use solar generation as a way of changing behaviour. Community energy and solar generation provides an opportunity to educate children who then influence their families. Extending the scope of this programme to education could have a real impact on future generations. Schools may be able to pre-register for FiT, as well as community groups.

A member queried which residents would benefit from the community benefit funds generated by Repowering London solar schemes. Repowering London explained that the benefit would go to the residents on the estate with the solar arrays. This could be a way of sharing the benefits with residents, given the challenges of directly reducing bills to council tenants.

The Juniper House secretary emphasised the important of sharing the cash benefit directly and equally with estate residents. He said schemes like this offer an opportunity to provide validation for social housing. To date residents have worked hard on this with little guarantee that there will be a direct benefit. The council has the capacity to employ solar at economies of scale. He said that people want to focus on their own lives as they have a

deficit of leisure and family time, and the trick is to ensure that residents are involved in ways they enjoy and are good at, not to make them bureaucrats.

The chair invited officers to respond to the issue of sharing the benefit directly through reductions to bills. Officers explained that tenants would benefit to a small extent under existing policy as the savings from communal electricity costs would be shared across the borough. He said the policy to share communal costs was introduced as part of rent restructuring in 2003, in response to government policy. That does not mean to say the council cannot change this policy, however he said that while it would benefit places with planned schemes it would also be to the detriment of other social housing tenants.

There are different categories of communal costs e.g. ground maintenance, lighting, door entry etc., however it is difficult to extract a particular estate service potentially benefiting from solar (e.g. lifts) as it will always be somewhat reliant on the grid during the night, so subject to the pooling policy.

The chair asked community energy representatives if this dilemma had been solved in other schemes across the country, and if local authorities have been able to directly reduce the bills of people who are involved in schemes. Representatives said they are unaware of this, unless the scheme was a direct energy supplier. This is the challenge that Repowering Energy also faced in council housing estates where commonly the communal costs are socialised across the borough. The challenge of sharing the benefit with tenants was a driver in developing community funds. Housing associations do share the cash benefits directly with both tenants and leaseholders.

A TMO representative commented that savings to communal electricity from solar would benefit all residents indirectly by increasing the estate coffers.

A cabinet member asked officers if the current policy to pool communal costs could be changed via an amendment to the policy and what would be the challenges, difficulties, impact on the budget, and potential objections from other tenants. Officers advised it could be conceived as inequitable by other tenants who would lose out. If cabinet decided to make those changes it would go into the overall account and not effect the council budget overall, however it would mean a variation to the charges to estate communal areas. Juniper House commented that once one scheme has got going other community energy projects would join thereby reducing the overall bills of more and more social housing tenants. A Commission member commented that as a council tenant he supported the current pooling arrangement and sharing the costs and benefit across the council as he thought this was more equitable and a principle of social housing.

A tenant asked if solar installations could reduce the electricity bills in individual estate homes, not just the communal bills, as this would provide more direct benefit to tenants and leaseholders in the line with the council's aspiration to utilise community energy to reduce residents' bills.

A roundtable participant commented that the real savings in carbon would come from combined heat and power schemes, district heating, energy reduction schemes, as well as developing solar.

Officers were asked why these three pilots were chosen. Officers said that each is using a different approach so this enables testing of different models, addressing the technical challenges and understanding the potential benefits. They also all have a strong TRA or TMO who expressed an interest so there is existing community enthusiasm and buy in.

The council has commissioned a feasibility study of each site which will report by the end of February.

Pre-registration to benefit from the FiT was discussed. Groups who are a legal entity and have an Energy Performance Certificate will probably be able to pre-register by 31 March 2019. It may be possible to piggy back with a community energy group.

Concern was raised about the viability of solar with the end of FiT and the importance of lobbying government for this to continue.

A participant said often the most direct way of reducing energy is actually through insulation, and through LED lighting. The savings from the installing solar on estates could be redirected towards this.

Haddonhall said that their estate is already well insulated so they were looking at other ways of reducing their carbon footprint.

There are eco funds from the GLA and the government which will pay for metering and other initiatives. This reopened last year. The council can apply for this. There are also large finance schemes, with very small interest repayments, and communal heating funds from government/ Mayors office. These are huge schemes that are available and a big opportunity for the commission to champion and monitor. There are also communal heating systems that combine heat and power that are one of the most efficient methods of saving money and carbon.

The maintenance of solar installations was discussed. Community Energy representatives that said a maintenance contract is drawn up lasting 20 year, this is a long legal document and includes maintenance and other eventualities such as taking down the solar panels once to replace roofs.

The post FiT business model was discussed, and if solar schemes would be viable when FiT ends. SELCE gave a quick run through of the emerging models: one is 'energy local where users club together. Solar panels and the associated technology is developing, particularly the storage of energy, which is reducing the cost of installation and the potential to sell to the national grid at peak time generating preferential rates. Diverting benefits from solar into insulation and other energy reduction methods is a significant part of the current community energy model. The schemes also currently make use of the eco funds available, which are targeted at owner occupiers. Community energy representatives were confident that a new business model will emerge.

SELCE, SE24 and Repowering London invited the Commission to visit projects and see how initiatives like energy cafes benefit residents.

10. WORKPLAN

This was not covered.

Housing & Environment Commission

Empty Homes – Interim Report

The Housing & Environment Commission chose 'Empty Homes' as its first topic for investigation in 2018-19. The inquiry scope included both public and private stock and the Commission took a report from Officers at its meeting on October 17th 2018.

There were a number of drivers for this inquiry:

- Recognition of recent challenges relating the turn-around of voids;
- The need to maximise our use of existing stock to meet the needs of Southwark residents on our council housing waiting list (approximately 10,500);
- Anecdotal evidence of new build properties, especially in the north of the borough, being left vacant (so-called 'buy to leave').

Council Officers present at that meeting to give evidence included:

Paul Langford, Director of Resident Services, Housing and Modernisation

Cheryl Russell, Area Manager, Housing Modernisation

Keith Kiernan, Specialist Services Contract Manager

Michelle Williams, Project Officer

At that meeting, the Commission requested further information from Council Officers on a range of topics. This information, where available, is presented below. Officers have advised however that at this stage, they are unable to fully answer the Commission's questions on empty homes in the private sector. A working group has been established to look at the available data, ways of measuring empty homes and responding to the challenge. The Commission hopes that this group will be able to report back to Scrutiny in due course.

1) Overall Figures on Empty Homes

- There is some confusion about the overall number of empty homes in Southwark. Various figures and estimates have been made but nothing which is authoritative, especially on empty homes in the private sector. *The Council should establish a methodology for the estimation of empty homes and should release this figure annually as a matter of course.*
- At the Housing & Environment Commission's meeting on 17th October 2018, the number of empty council homes was provided as follows:
 - 307 properties due to refurbishment decisions awaiting
 - 846 properties on the Aylesbury Estate awaiting demolition
 - 27 properties awaiting decisions regarding disposal
 - 144 active voids being turned around.
- The figures presented in the written report from Officers presented the information in a slightly different way. That document gave a headline figure of 664 empty council properties

of which 499 are 'non-active' - including 140 awaiting demolition - and 165 are 'active'. The discrepancy in the 'non-active' figures (between the report and the Commission meeting) appears to result from the next phase of the Aylesbury Estate regeneration moving forward.

- The Commission recognises that time has been needed to ensure the right decisions are made regarding the Ledbury and Maydew House on the Abbeyfield Estate. Both of these projects are now moving forward and the proposed works on Maydew House went out to procurement before Christmas. *The Commission recommends that the use of vacated properties on the Aylesbury Estate continues to be maximised by the Council for temporary accommodation.*

2) Council Stock – Voids

- The Council Plan now includes a target to turn around voids within 28 days which the Commission welcomes. The Commission recognises that a considerable amount of work has been done by the recently established 'Voids Project Group' and that the current turnaround time is now averaging 33 days. This compares with an average time of 107 days in 2017/18.
- The Commission notes that a review of the Council's work on voids has been commissioned from Housemark in order to further improve performance. We also note that the Council's in-house provider, Southwark Building Services (SBS) have taken on all voids work across the borough from October 2018. We therefore expect to see further improvements and *the Commission recommends that a further follow-up report be brought to Scrutiny in due course to track progress against these changes.*
- The Commission remains concerned about major voids and some of the historic long-term voids which remain in the system. *Further figures have been requested which break down the council voids into those that have been empty for less than 12 months, 12-24 months, and any over 24 months. It would also be helpful to have the average turnaround time for those classified as 'major voids'.*
- *The Commission also requests that any follow-up reports includes information about adaptations to voids, and the average time taken to prepare a property for new residents requiring adaptations.*

3) Council Stock – Disposal Policy

- The Commission asked for clarification on the Council's current 'disposal policy'. *We remain concerned by the lack of available family homes in the borough and urge the Council to retain larger properties within its stock wherever possible.*
- Council Officers have explained that when properties require significant investment, they are referred to a specialist team. Previously, a requirement for investment for around £50,000 or more would have automatically led to a disposal. Property decisions are now more contextualised and there are examples of greater sums being invested in order to

retain properties. *The Commission would like further clarification on the current policy and process, and recommends that the disposal policy be reviewed going forward in light of housing need.*

4) Empty Homes in the Private Sector

- The Commission sought clarification on the number of estimated private sector empty homes in the borough. No figures for this were provided in the Officers' report although discussion referred back to council tax data from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The 2017 CLG data refers to an estimated 5,944 empty properties in Southwark (public and private sector). *The Commission requests further work be done by Officers to fully understand these figures. We would like a report to come back to the Commission later in 2019 providing an updated headline figure and further detail on how this breaks down, including housing association properties and so-called 'buy to leave' properties.*
- The Commission would like to better understand the range of policy options available to the Council to dis-incentivise so-called 'buy to leave'. *The Commission has urged the Council to levy the maximum amount of council tax premium on empty homes.*
- The Commission heard about the Council's work to bring empty homes back into use through the use of grants and loans, and repair and lease agreements. Properties can also be rented through housing solutions, including as temporary accommodation, as an option for owners who feel unable to manage their properties directly. In 2017-18, 30 properties were brought back into use as a result of this work. Whilst the examples provided are welcome, the team appears small given the caseload. We were told that there are 1000s of properties on the team's database, with around 600 open cases.
- The Commission discussed possible enforcement action including the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) and Empty Management Dwelling Orders (EMDOs), the second of which enable the Council to take up temporary management of an empty property for up to seven years. It was reported that the Council was currently exploring five CPOs but does not favour the use of EMDOs due to the administrative costs involved. *The Commission would like to understand whether there would be a long term 'return on investment' the council by expanding the empty homes team further.*
- Finally, the Commission also discussed the issue of furnished properties which are infrequently let (not counted as 'empty' in CLG statistics). *In the first instance, the Commission would like to understand what the Council is doing to understand the extent of this practice across the borough, and what data sources might be drawn upon.*

Conclusion

Given the significant pressures on housing in the borough, the issue of empty homes and how existing housing stock – both public and private – is used, must be front of mind. The Commission looks forward to a further meeting on this issue, later in 2019, to fully explore the outstanding issues raised in this report.

Public Summary of the Resident Involvement Quality Review carried out by the Housing Quality Network, January 2019

Background

In 2017 Southwark Council received a report it had commissioned from Kaizen Partnership making a number of recommendations in relation to resident involvement.

In the council's own words, 'Kaizen noted that the resident involvement structure had changed little since the late 1980s despite huge social and cultural changes in the borough, in the way the housing service is run and in terms of technology and social media. The engagement structure therefore merited a substantial review.'

This process of review was included in the May 2018 governing group's manifesto and in June, 'the Cabinet agreed to review of the engagement structure and its associated assets and given the scale of the change the council committed to create as open and inclusive a process as possible to carry out the review, and one that allowed all residents to have their say.'

The review was carried out by a resident-led Co-design Panel under an independent Chair (Phil Morgan). The council invited nominees from Tenants Council, Homeowners Council, Youth Council and the My Southwark Homeowners Board. Places were also made available for 7 (+ 2 reserves) non-aligned residents, recruited on the basis of applications and selected to be broadly representative of the diversity of the tenant and homeowner population.

In order to progress rapidly to meet deadlines set by the council, TRA secretaries and chairs were directly invited to apply, as were Area Housing Forum delegates. In addition, over 5000 tenants and homeowners were contacted directly by email about joining the Panel, and sent information, and an application form and given a deadline by which to respond. Ninety-eight residents applied and the independent chair invited seven applicants as well as two reserves to join the panel to achieve a balanced group on the basis of gender, location, age, ethnicity and availability. Those who were not selected for the Panel were invited to contribute to the review as members of a Sounding Board.

The Co-design Panel made recommendations based on the evidence provided to it. All residents and their organisations were able to send in their views and suggestions and all the evidence, as well as the reports to and minutes of the Panel's meetings, were published on the council's website.

The Co-design Panel met every 2-3 weeks until mid-December – an extension at the Panel's request, from the original deadline of mid-December. The resulting report was issued for consultation in early January.

The process was boycotted by Tenants Council and Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

The brief

HQN were asked carry out a qualitative review of the working of LB Southwark's Resident Involvement Review Co-design Panel.

The purpose of the review was to enable the council to learn the lessons from the process to inform future initiatives.

We have carried out the review under the following headings

1. Ownership of the process
2. Recruitment/Composition of the Panel
3. Training/induction/briefing of the Panel
4. Timetable of meetings/reports
5. Meeting themes
6. Timing location of meetings
7. Conduct of meetings
8. Reports to meetings
9. Attendance
10. Transparency/publication of papers
11. Role of Officers
12. Chairing of meetings
13. Sounding Board
14. Quality of the report
15. Overall conclusions

Who I spoke to

- Phil Morgan: The Chair of the panel
- Martin Kovats, Eva Gomez, and John McCormack, Officers of the council
- Five of the Resident panel members met with me at the end of the process (in two meetings) to offer their views

Documents I read

- The Kaizen report
- All papers, minutes, and agendas considered in the eight meetings of the panel
- The final report of the panel subsequently issued for consultation
- Southwark Council updates on the process on review's dedicated website

Meetings I've attended/observed

I observed the eighth and final meeting of the group on December 19th, 2019

Findings and Recommendations

1. Ownership of the process

The council was fully committed and owned the process. It is also clear that those residents who put themselves forward to participate were committed to the concept and, in their feedback, gave credit to the council for taking the initiative to create a co-design process.

However there were problems of ownership and commitment among specific groups, notably Tenants Council and the Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations (SGTO). Tenants Council declined to take up its seat on the panel and SGTO led a campaign to boycott the process.

While the Resident Involvement team's managers were both wholly committed both to the process and to attendance at the panel's meetings, the attendance of some officers was less regular. In future exercises it is important that those who attend are of sufficient seniority.

The relationship between the council and some members of the Tenants Council is widely seen as antagonistic and negative. While other groupings were not actively antagonistic to the process, some officers felt that with more time it would have been beneficial to have explained the background, thinking and context of the review more thoroughly.

Recommendations

- The Council's self-evident ownership and commitment to this process needs to be improved by appropriate levels of attendance and seniority from its own officers.
- For the future, in setting up groups of this sort time should be allowed in the process to ensure all stakeholders with an interest – whether individuals or groups – are fully briefed and have an opportunity to discuss any concerns or issues.

- It is clearly unsatisfactory that the relationship of the council and a representative group, in this case Tenant Council, should be so poor. The council should seek openly to address the problem and adopt a strategy to address it.

2. Recruitment/Composition of the Panel

The recruitment process was wide reaching and considerably broadened the opportunities for those who had not previously participated in such activity to become involved. The selection of members by the independent chair, rather than by council officers, lent credibility to the neutrality of those selected. In the view of the Chair, the selection process resulted in the involvement of 'seven people who clearly had something to offer'

Those who participated might be expected to be complimentary on the selection process. Nevertheless their views are worth quoting. They were 'impressed by Southwark making the effort to involve residents in co-design' and 'it was a good idea. The email was very clear and attracted me to apply' it 'sounded really interesting and the selection process was really good'

However there were criticisms as well.

A difficult relationship between the Homeowners Council representative and My Southwark Home Owner Board didn't help healthy discussion. The commitment to the continued existence of the My Southwark Homeowners Agency and Board could have been made clearer to the panel. Discussions around this point, and around the preference for a single homeowners representative body should have been informed by this.

Originally, the representative of the My Southwark Homeowners Board was the council officer who chaired the Board, rather than a homeowner member. This person stood down after one meeting. A replacement joined the panel but only in time to join the last three meetings.

Recommendations

- The recruitment opportunity offered to wide range of residents is good practice. With more time the opportunity could have been offered through wider publicity to a larger pool.
- Representative bodies should be represented by users, regardless of whether those bodies are chaired or in some other way serviced by council officers
- Any 'non-negotiables' should be made clear from the outset

3. Training/induction/briefing of the Panel

A review of the meeting papers as well as feedback from participants themselves demonstrate that induction was good in the first meeting, which was largely given over to briefing the participants on the background and the issues. The reports were well written and accessible. Furthermore, throughout the process the Chair's briefing for each meeting was particularly well written and easy to read.

However, the flipside of recruiting a number of people who had not previously taken part in such an exercise, and who lack detailed knowledge of the subject under discussion, is that participants start from a low level of knowledge. Participants felt that there was a steep learning curve in absorbing the history, the context, the present arrangements, the future options and the issues, and there was a general view that more time would have been helpful to do so.

A second issue was that, other than some time given over in the first meeting to make introductions, there were no real opportunities for the panel to get to know each other as a team. As a result a number of participants felt that the panel acted more as individuals throughout the series of meetings and never really developed as a group.

Together with some uncertainty about the subjects under discussion, lack of familiarity with each other may well be the reason that all of those interviewed noted that the group were 'quite quiet' for the first 'two or three' meetings. It is possible, although it cannot be said for certain, that the group's lack of familiarity with each other hindered open discussion to a degree, and may well have hindered the chances of reaching a consensus.

This was more a consequence of the tight timetable rather than a lack of awareness on the part of the Chair or officers

Recommendations

- Time should be set aside at the outset of the process to ensure that all participants are fully briefed in preparation for the work of the panel
- Time should also be set aside to enable participants to become acquainted and better able to act as a team through familiarity and being comfortable to express their views in front of each other.

4. Timetable of meetings/reports

Almost all those interviewed said that the timetable was tight and that the process suffered accordingly. Most meetings were fortnightly but three meetings were held in three successive weeks.

While servicing of the meetings was good, the tightness of the timetable meant that papers occasionally went out late and some residents found they were unable to read them, at least in full, in time. Officers felt that this offered no time to reflect and it was very challenging to administer. The extension of the timetable (by a month) showed some flexibility, but not enough.

Recommendations

- The lack of time and the feeling the process was rushed recurs throughout feedback. Sufficient time needs to be allowed to enable full induction at the outset, the opportunity for the team to gel, reflection between meetings, time to prepare, read and digest reports and to avoid untied loose ends at the end of the process.

5. Meeting themes

Laying out the themes in advance was good. Members of the panel knew what was to be discussed and when, so could be assured that, if they had particular areas of interest, they would be covered. A number of participants made reference to the 'excellent structure to the meetings'.

The initial inclusion of the 'use of tenant halls' as a theme jarred although I recognise that the reason for inclusion was that this was intended to be a review of both the 'engagement structure' and 'it's associated assets'. The theme was indeed replaced by 'use of digital means of engagement', whose omission originally was equally surprising given the strong trend in resident engagement to embrace all forms of digital means of communication.

The change of theme however demonstrated flexibility in content.

The 'liveliest meeting' according to several was that attended by Ledbury Residents Association, although one resident described their report on the antagonism they had experienced to have been very disheartening because it reflected one of the barriers to more people getting involved

Recommendations

None

6. Timing and location of meetings

No issues were raised by any interviewees.

Recommendations

None

7. Conduct of meetings

The general consensus that that the tone of meetings had been reflective, positive and focussed on problem solving. The fact that this was a task and finish group with a clear remit helped in giving the participants focus. All struggled with the timetable, as mentioned above.

A number of participants described the first two or three meetings as low key, with members of the group appearing reticent to contribute. A learning point from many, as alluded to earlier, is to create ways in which participants can get to know each other and feel more relaxed/confident in each other's company.

The way the meetings were run meant according to one member, everyone 'had a chance' and the Chair and others did their best to ensure this was a place where it felt 'safe to disagree'.

There was a problem with the behaviour of one panel member. A code of conduct and team ethos was agreed at the first meeting, which included sanctions for 'unacceptable behaviour' including the option to put 'a motion...to the meeting to suspend the person from meetings of the Panel' but this was not invoked. The Chair's view, which is entirely reasonable, was that after a difficult first meeting the individual's attitude improved. The recurrence of difficult

behaviour came towards the end of the process, by which time it felt too late and impolitic to invoke the code.

It seems more likely that had the panel had more time to gel as a group at the outset, peer pressure would have had a more positive impact on moderating behaviour.

The Cabinet Member for Housing Management and Modernisation attended the panel's final meeting. Much of the discussion was centred round whether there should be single strategic resident representative body or separate bodies for tenants and home-owners, or a hybrid. Mixed views were expressed round the table and quite late in the discussion, the Councillor spoke out clearly against 'separate silos', extolling the virtues of a mixed tenure body. This surprised to some of the residents I spoke to, who had understood the Councillor had come to observe. Another resident, however, felt it was the confrontational approach of another panel member which might have 'intimidated some into silence' prevented them coming to consensus, not the expressed views of a member.

There were mixed views on whether the council should have steered the process more explicitly. Some felt they were right to remain neutral. Others felt it would have been helpful to have known the council's standpoint from the start.

Recommendations

- Whatever groups might be established as a consequence of this review, the Code of Conduct, adopted by the group, amended if necessary to meet the particular requirements of the group, needs to be adopted and to applied to all.
- The council should decide at the outset as to whether to express its initial viewpoint or whether to remain silent and await the work of the panel to complete.

8. Reports to meetings

The content of reports was very good: clear, informally written and easy to understand. The Chair's reflective written briefing to each meeting successfully gave context and feedback since the previous meeting, and introduced the agenda.

There was a lot to absorb in the papers in a very short time for people largely new to it. However the problem lay not in the content. It was the 'last minute' nature of despatch on a few occasions that caused difficulties

Recommendations

None

9. Attendance

Average attendance at each meeting was seven out of the thirteen members (or 8 if the attendance of substitutes is included). Five members of the panel attended six meetings or more (there were eight meetings in total). Levels of attendance remained reasonably constant through the course of the process: there doesn't appear therefore to have been a tailing off of interest.

The Youth Council representative only attended one meeting. It might have been better to have discussed with the Youth Council a more appropriate representative with more of a stake in the issues being discussed.

Recommendations

There is a limit to the degree to which volunteers can be obliged to attend meetings. I would suggest that a less intensive schedule such as monthly rather than fortnightly, and at times weekly, meetings might have the effect of improving the figures

It may be helpful for the council briefly to survey those with, say, attendance figures of five meetings or less to establish their reasons for their inability to attend more meetings attendance, to better inform future arrangements.

Council representatives should be at the right level and should attend the majority of meetings. Outside bodies invited to send representatives should be encouraged to commit to the process and send individuals appropriate to the task.

10. Transparency/publication of papers

There was good practice in respect of transparency and availability of papers. Reports, minutes freely available and easily found on Southwark website

Recommendations

None

11. Role of Officers

Amongst officers themselves roles were largely clear but there were some blurred edges. There was 'a bit of a lack of glue' according to one.

There was much praise for the contributions of John McCormack and Eva Gomez. Some felt that more explanation about who was there and why would have been helpful.

For some staff members of the panel there was some ambiguity about their role: were they impartial advisors or full panel members, and whose views were they expressing or 'allowed' to express? This ambiguity should have been addressed by making explicit officers' roles. For future exercises, elected members could take part in a co-design process instead or alongside officers.

Recommendations

- The role of officers on the panel was not clear and this ambiguity should be avoided in future exercises, for example in one of the ways suggested above.

12. Chairing of meetings

By all accounts the meetings were chaired well and the Chair was also actively engaged between meetings. The meeting I attended was chaired well: he was sensitive and sensible and clear in his summarising and steering

Recommendations

None, the appointment of an independent chair was a great strength in the process

13. The Sounding Board and the use of IT

Officers in particular regretted that the use of the Sounding Board – those applicants who applied but were not invited to join the panel - was largely unsuccessful. Very few responses were received to consultations and papers. Officers also were disappointed that IT innovations were unsuccessful. They had wanted to create a community discussion shared drive but ended up simply putting information on the website. This was a shortcoming. 'We simply couldn't get the IT to work – but it's definitely a prize worth fighting for'

Recommendations

- Time should be allowed at the beginning of the process to brief members of the Sounding Board and proactively encourage their involvement, perhaps by having a one-off meeting/presentation to explain background/options and context, together with explaining the means by which participants can input. There might also be an end of process meeting to their response to the recommendations as part of the consultation process.

14. Quality of the report

The report is well written and clear, and the outcomes relate to the brief.

Residents to whom I spoke felt that 'the report has taken us a long way forward' and there was a lot of consensus on the recommendations at a lower level – particularly the 'ring of involvement' There is some disappointment that the panel could not reach agreement on the issue of a single strategic resident body, or otherwise. As the Chair observed there was 'No point forcing a consensus... there was no overt agreement on the strategic overview body.'

Recommendations

None, other than earlier observations about allowing the process more time

15. Overall

Taking the exercise at face value, there is much to commend. There is much good practice to point out. The commissioning of the original Kaizen report, the design of the process, the themed meetings, the selection process, the attempt to cast the net beyond current involved 'residents'. The appointment of an independent chair, and the concept of co-design itself are all impressive. Residents who participated were impressed with many aspects of the exercise.

There were aspects to the consultation, such as the Sounding Board and the shared drive which were less successful, but these two were set up with the best of intentions, and the council is likely to want to persevere with these approaches in future exercises.

There were, however, drawbacks to the process. Overwhelmingly the main issue was the timetable, which all concerned felt was tight. The evidence of the impact on various aspects of the process has been drawn out throughout this report, so I shall not repeat the points.

One member said that 'All in all, there were good intentions – fresh people and so on – in practice didn't quite work. It was too rushed and therefore panel weren't well enough informed' Another said it was a 'great idea to involve residents who had not previously been involved, but they needed more time to get a feel for the history context and options to put forward well informed views'

In summary the model has a lot to commend it. In future however timescales need to be more realistic. Whatever model is utilised it needs to begin with an extended exercise to bring the team together and create familiarity and a bond. One way of proceeding thereafter could be to take a radically different approach of having two or three extended events to complete the project rather than eight two-hour meetings over a series of weeks. For example, approaching the exercise by setting aside two all day, or overnight, away events three or four weeks apart, could prove a more efficient use of time.

With these caveats and with the issues addressed, together with absolute clarity as to the council's approach to taking a view or remaining silent until the review is complete. The model has much to recommend it and should serve as a basis for further work of this kind.

Peter Walters 31/01/19

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