



REGENERATION & RESOURCES SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the REGENERATION & RESOURCES SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE held on THURSDAY 9 MARCH 2006 at 7:00PM at the Town Hall, Peckham Road, London SE5 8UB

PRESENT: Councillor Toby Eckersley – Chair
Councillor Jane Salmon - Vice Chair
Councillor David Hubber

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Neil Watson – Chair, Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee

OFFICERS: Mick Daniels – Assistant Director, Education
David Eatwell – Housing Area Manager, Peckham
Glen Egan – Assistant Borough Solicitor
Paul Evans – Strategic Director of Regeneration
Dan Hollas – Housing Area Manager, Walworth
Maurice Soden – Regeneration Initiatives Manager
Peter Roberts – Scrutiny Project Manager

OTHERS: Ian Gardner - Chair, Thurlow Lodge TRA
Doreen Gee – Chair, Heygate T&RA
Brenda Hutton – Aylesbury Estate, Leaseholders
John Nosworthy – Leaseholders' Council
Althea Smith – Acorn Estate

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors John Friary, Billy Kayada, Michelle Pearce.

CONFIRMATION OF VOTING MEMBERS

The Members listed as being present were confirmed as the Voting Members.

NOTIFICATION OF ANY OTHER ITEMS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS AS URGENT

None.

DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were none.

RECORDING OF MEMBERS' VOTES

Council Procedure Rule 1.17(5) allows a Member to record her/his vote in respect of any motions and amendments. Such requests are detailed in the following Minutes. Should a Member's vote be recorded in respect to an amendment, a copy of the amendment may be found in the Minute File and was available for public inspection.

The Sub-Committee considered the items set out on the agenda, a copy of which has been incorporated in the Minute File. Each of the following paragraphs relates to the item bearing the same number on the agenda.

MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Regeneration & Resources Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on 2 February 2006 be agreed as a correct record of proceedings and signed by the Chair.

1. REGENERATION POLICY AND PRACTICE: REHOUSING OF TENANTS AND LEASEHOLDERS [see pages 1 – 7]

Communication

- 1.1 Althea Smith, Acorn Estate, stressed the importance of residents being informed, as soon as possible, of which stage of a regeneration project their property would fall within. Brenda Hutton, Aylesbury Leaseholders, stated that it had only been in the previous week that all residents on the Aylesbury had received letters informing them of whether or not their property was to be demolished. Ian Gardner, Thurlow Lodge, agreed that residents were very concerned about phasing; about knowing when their own property would be involved in the process and how much longer they would be able to remain in their property.
- 1.2 The Strategic Director for Regeneration explained the different circumstances on the estates. Issues of phasing were closer to being resolved on the Heygate than on the Aylesbury. Decisions on the Aylesbury needed to take account of issues such as a possible tram route and the site of schools and other facilities. It was important not to take a decision too early which might, with further information, prove not be the best solution in the long term.
- 1.3 The Strategic Director for Regeneration emphasised that it was essential to communicate at all levels, and using all possible channels, throughout a regeneration project. The New Deal for Communities Team on the Aylesbury was a strong base for resident involvement, supported by the steering group and communications sub-group. He acknowledged that, while letters had now been sent to individual residents, there was always the danger that these may not be read.
- 1.4 The Housing Area Manager, Walworth, emphasised the importance of all housing staff on a particular estate understanding the project and being able to provide a basic level of information to residents.

- 1.5 Althea Smith commented that communication had been poor on Wooddene and that in future a defined procedure should be followed to ensure that residents were kept informed. A standardised package could be developed to inform residents at the offset of a project about the procedure for communication. It could also cover general areas such as decant policy and rights of leaseholders but allow flexibility to take account of specific local circumstances.
- 1.6 Althea Smith was also of the opinion that the Project Team had not met sufficiently regularly and that members had not been replaced once they had moved off the estate. Doreen Gee from the Heygate stated that the frequency of meetings and communication with residents often depended on when new information was available. Althea Smith felt that, after the experience of earlier regeneration initiatives in the borough, it should now be possible to draw up a package setting out best practice.
- 1.7 John Nosworthy, Leaseholders' Council, reported that he had been working with leaseholders on the Aylesbury Estate. He suggested that more and better use could be made of the newsletter and the website, perhaps inviting residents to provide comments in both. The Housing Area Manager, Peckham, agreed that the website was an effective way of communication. A member of the sub-committee suggested that another way to make use of a website would be to display information about other developments completed by the project contractor. It was also suggested that members of steering groups and project teams could visit and report back on such developments.
- 1.8 Doreen Gee, Heygate T&RA, identified a further issue in terms of use of focus groups for consultation. She felt that sometimes the same individuals were invited to participate in the groups and stressed the importance of ensuring that membership be altered in order for a cross section of the community to be able to give their views.

Security

- 1.9 The Sub-Committee asked whether there had been an improvement on Wooddene following the deputation to Council Assembly. Althea Smith replied that security had improved and security guards and community wardens were visiting the estate more regularly. However, she emphasised how important it was to provide proper security when estates were undergoing regeneration, in order to discourage squatters and vandalism.
- 1.10 Doreen Gee reported experience on the Heygate where residents had asked for empty properties to be made available for key workers, short-lets or temporary homeless. This avoided the creation of floors with only one or two properties occupied. There had been some initial problems with new tenants but meetings were now held with the Temporary Homeless Unit to address issues as they arose. At the same time Doreen Gee commented that it was not possible to totally eradicate squatting.
- 1.11 The Housing Manager, Walworth, reported that empty properties had to be handled carefully. Boarding up empty properties could attract the attention of squatters. Once squatted, the council actively took all the steps it could to repossess the property but court processes took time. The Assistant Borough Solicitor indicated that a cross-departmental group was looking at properties still squatted and reviewing where they were in terms of the legal process. The sub-committee was of the view that central government should be asked to improve the legislation available to local authorities to remove squatters.

- 1.12 Ian Gardner asked whether decanting could be phased so that a block could be demolished as soon as it was empty. The Strategic Director for Regeneration responded that the effect of offering residents choice in decant was a greater inconsistency of movement. The council was liaising with the police and the Safer Southwark Partnership to consider whether advanced knowledge of phasing could be used to better plan deployment of resources and enhance surveillance coverage.
- 1.13 Doreen Gee indicated that a number of properties were left in such a poor condition that they could not be re-let. Some secure tenants felt that the work carried out to be able to let properties, for instance re-wiring and re-decorating, was not available for their own properties if they were awaiting decant. There was a perceived difference in the approach to repairing obligations between the homeless unit and the mainstream housing department and the sub-committee recommended that this be investigated.

Services

- 1.14 The sub-committee asked whether, during the process of a regeneration project, the costs of maintaining services could fall disproportionately on leaseholders remaining in blocks. The Housing Manager, Peckham, clarified that costs were based on the number of housing units not on the number of people. Costs might rise, for example because of increased lighting on estates. The costs of communal heating systems could not necessarily be reduced. Services could only be scaled back to a base level. The sub-committee was of the view that there might be additional heating costs to all residents if, for instance, additional heating was required to supplement communal systems.

Leaseholders and compulsory purchase

- 1.15 The sub-committee raised concerns in respect of leaseholders and compulsory purchase:
- Who determined whether individual leaseholders were unable to secure alternative accommodation themselves?
 - Did the fact that compensation payable would only equate to 50% of a shared ownership unit imply that the valuation on the initial property was very low?
- 1.16 The sub-committee was unclear whether or not the prospect and initial effects of a regeneration scheme had to be disregarded in the valuation. The Regeneration Initiatives Manager clarified that valuations should disregard the scheme and depended on a track record of valuations being available. The sub-committee remained concerned that the council was making use of all possible discretions in order to ease the difficulties of leaseholders.
- 1.17 Brenda Hutton asked whether properties could be valued early on, rather than later in the scheme when the impact of surrounding building works might reduce the valuation. Valuation could then be linked to an appropriate property index. There was also concern that valuations given would be general, applied to all properties of the same size, and not take account of the internal condition of each property.

- 1.18 The sub-committee was concerned about cases where leaseholders were unable to raise an increased mortgage and might wish to become secure tenants. Members asked for clarification of any element of means testing involved in the various options open to leaseholders. They also asked that criteria for comparative value transactions be drawn up without delay.
- 1.19 The sub-committee expressed the view that clear guidelines needed to be drawn up on all of the above issues and on the general rights of leaseholders.
- 1.20 John Nosworthy also raised a problem of lack of information, in terms of inadequate information being available about the number of leaseholders on the Aylesbury. It was important for leaseholders' groups to be able to contact and consult with all leaseholders on the estate.

Education

- 1.21 The Assistant Director, Education, reported that the main priority was to minimise disruption to the education of children and to the organisation of schools, for instance where movement of a number of children might impact on a school's budget. Information needed to be provided as soon as possible in terms of specific blocks to be decanted, relevant postcodes, and where families were moving.
- 1.22 The Strategic Director of Regeneration stressed that his department always worked closely with Education, for instance to project the impact of significant private sector housing developments. The "child yield" was calculated for different categories and size of housing. Members were concerned that this methodology provided information in sufficient time for educational planning. Officers reported that in the past the Council had used GLA data but that it was now doing detailed projections of its own.
- 1.23 The Sub-Committee was concerned that the size of any new primary schools needed to be ascertained as soon as possible. There was also concern that land should be reserved for any new secondary school, as against land needed for new housing or decant. The Assistant Director, Education, stated that the optimum size of primary school was considered to be a two-form entry. Where there was increasing demand, it was hoped that schools with currently one and a half form entry could be moved towards the favoured model of two-form.
- 1.24 The Assistant Director briefly updated the Sub-Committee on Walworth Secondary School. The governing body was discussing a move to academy status. An expression of interest was being developed for submission to the Department of Education & Science. The charity Absolute Return for Children was a possible sponsor with other possible contributions being made by health partners. It would be ideal if a new site could be identified which would not disrupt the current site.
- 1.25 In response to questions, the Assistant Director indicated that necessary procedures would be put in place to answer the needs of children with special educational needs. Leading up to the closure of Galleywall School, surgeries had been held to better explain the options available and the school psychology service had assessed the emotional impact on children.

RESOLVED: The Executive is asked to consider the following areas and proposals in relation to policy and practice for the rehousing of tenants and leaseholders in regeneration areas:

Communication

- That the earliest possible communication is provided of phasing of decants and of the likely minimum life of occupation to be expected in properties and areas associated with each of the various stages.
- That a package of information be drawn up, to be provided to all residents in a regeneration area, outlining policies and rights (general and local); the package needs to be comprehensive but in clear language.
- That good practice be identified in terms of frequency of meetings of steering group, project team and other related groups in regeneration areas.
- To consider and recommend better use of newsletters, IT and websites, including comments pages, as a way of increasing the flow of information to and between residents and the council.
- That members of steering groups and project teams be encouraged to visit and report back on e.g. existing housing association developments (as a way of gathering information about the type of property likely to be offered in the completed development and perhaps using a website to display this information for all residents).
- Where focus groups are used to gather and communicate information, that membership be representative of the whole cross section of residents.

Security and services

- That the Executive lobby central government on improving the legislation available to local authorities to remove squatters.
- That a perceived difference in approach to repairing obligations between the homeless unit and the mainstream housing department be investigated (the perception being that the homeless unit repairs to a higher standard, prior to letting property, than existing secure tenants can receive if they are awaiting decant).
- That it be explored whether the cost of additional services relating to regeneration impact unfairly on remaining leaseholders and tenants, particularly with reference to increased heating costs.

Leaseholders and compulsory purchase

- That it be confirmed that the council is using to the full all discretions allowable to local authorities.

- To consider a scheme for early valuation of properties to be compulsorily purchased, the valuation subsequently to be linked to a suitable property index.
- That the basis on which the ability of displaced leaseholders to secure own alternative accommodation is assessed is clarified, in the light of the fact that assessment is critical to whether or not leaseholders are permitted to become secure tenants.
- That criteria for comparative value transactions be drawn up without delay.
- That particular packages are considered around the above and related leaseholder issues, e.g. alternative housing, and prepared without delay for the benefit of Heygate and Aylesbury leaseholders (with clear guidance notes).
- In regeneration areas, that officers are instructed to convey to properly recognised residents' bodies the addresses of all leasehold and freehold properties on an estate.

Impact on schools

- That the need for adequate planning and exchange of information at an early stage be emphasised.

The meeting closed at 10:35pm.

CHAIR:

DATE: