



REGENERATION AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the REGENERATION AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE held on DECEMBER 5 2007 at 7:00PM at the Town Hall, Peckham Road, London SE5 8UB

PRESENT: Councillor Lewis Robinson (Chair)
Councillor Richard Livingstone
Councillor Paul Noblet

OFFICERS: Amma Boateng – principal lawyer
Hamish Beaton – scrutiny officer
Des Waters - Head of Public Realms
Steven Platts - Head of Property
Richard Long - Property Department Surveyor

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Mary Foulkes and the Liberal Democrats Group.

NOTIFICATION OF ANY OTHER ITEMS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS AS URGENT

None

DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

None

MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the Regeneration and Resources scrutiny sub-committee meeting held on October 31 2007 be agreed as a correct record of proceedings and signed by the chair.

1. RESTRUCTURE OF THE PUBLIC REALMS TEAMS

- 1.1 The chair introduced this item by recapping on the South Bermondsey Train Station development project that had been scrutinised at the 31 October 2007 Regeneration & Resources Scrutiny Sub-Committee meeting. The chair reported that concerns had been raised regarding the retention of project funding streams and the employment of an external project manager. The chair explained that, during the meeting, the project officers present had referred to the current restructuring of the Public Realm teams and had suggested that this would be a positive development in taking the development project forward. The committee had therefore wanted to receive an update from the Head of Public Realms to see how this restructure was progressing and how it was hoped to function in the future.
- 1.2 The Head of Public Realm circulated a Public Realm restructure chart. He noted that he had been in his current post since April 2007 and that the Public Realm teams were located within the Environment and Housing department. He explained that there had previously been several initiatives that had involved Environment & Housing teams working alongside teams from the Regeneration & Resources Neighbourhood Department. He noted that the work on the South Bermondsey Station Development was such an instance.
- 1.3 The Head of Public Realm assessed that the key issue for improvement of project delivery was how the Public Realm teams managed and understood the three different types of public spaces (estates, streets and green spaces) and the links between these spaces. The Head of Public Realm further stated that often the council did not handle big projects well, and tended to manage project implementation "in boxes". For example, one phase would be required to obtain funding, another to determine timing, another for procurement and meanwhile the delivery end of the project was neglected and often did not take place. The Head of Public Realm stated that he was now trying to find a single delivery method, rather than looking at project implementation in terms of compartmentalised "boxes".
- 1.4 Referring to the Public Realm restructure chart, the Head of Public Realm explained that the role of the Public Realm Project Manager was to focus on project delivery. The project manager would aim to acquire funding and build a project, all the time focussing on the project's delivery. The Head of Public Realm noted that a previous trial using this project delivery structure had led to significant enhancements to the council's Local Implementation Plan (LIP).
- 1.5 In addition to the Public Realm Project Manager, the Head of Public Realm expressed confidence with regards to the role of the Neighbourhood Engagement Team which would link with other organisations and aim to progress projects as smoothly as possible. The Head of Public Realm noted that he had increased the level of resources available to the Neighbourhood Engagement Team.
- 1.6 Meanwhile, the Street Scene Asset Manager was responsible for bringing together a collection of different maintenance operations into one group. These included: drainage and engineering, structures, lighting, maintenance of road network, CCTV asset management, street furniture, signage and insurance claims.
- 1.7 The Parks & Open Spaces Manager now has the remit for all green spaces. This includes arboriculture and tree maintenance, which had previously been under the Highways Team's remit. The Head of Public Realm believed that this current division of duties would be beneficial for the borough.

- 1.8 The Road Network & Parking Manager would oversee the following functions: streetscene management, parking policy & enforcement, the CPZ team, abandoned vehicles, and highway licences. The Manager would also be responsible for a nominated officer whose role was to ensure that traffic congestion is reduced - across all forms of transport.
- 1.9 Moreover, the Head of Public Realm explained that, on top of the basic functions of these teams and groups, there was now a requirement that all elements of the division understood what projects were currently being undertaken across the entire borough. The Head of Public Realm stated that the division needed to understand the scope of all public realm projects in each locality - be that parking, signage, trees, or roads etc. Therefore, at present there was an overarching responsibility to build understanding of council plans in each area. This knowledge would enable either the Head of Public Realm, a council member or a public enquirer etc to easily locate and contact the owner of each project. Having said that, the Head of Public Realm noted that the project owner should, technically speaking, be a member of the project manager group.
- 1.10 Returning to the role of the Public Realm Project Manager, the Head of Public Realm commented that the Project Manager had two purposes. One was to manage respective projects and the second was to act as a point of contact regarding public realm projects.
- 1.11 The chair sought confirmation that, under the new public realm structure, council members would be able to find out what projects were currently being worked on by each council team and which officers were working on each project.
- 1.12 The Head of Public Realm assured the chair that this was the case and that he was currently working to create a database that would map project plans, ambitions and funding. He noted that the Public Realm teams would also continue to work closely with Regeneration & Resources teams.
- 1.13 A member commented that during the recent scrutiny of the South Bermondsey Train Station development project, officers had stated that the Public Realm restructure was still in progress. The member asked the Head of Public Realm if he could therefore clarify the current status of the restructure.
- 1.14 The Head of Public Realm stated that he hoped for the structure to be in place by 17 December. He reported that the management team was already in place. The Head of Public Realm intended to meet with the various teams and sub teams before 14 December and begin to work with them. He commented, however, that he was unwilling to give concrete assurances as to when the final implementation phase would be. The Head of Public Realm noted that he was currently working to put a procurement gateway in place for project managers. This would enable inquirers to determine who made certain decisions and by when. As an example, he claimed that people would be able address their concerns regarding the South Bermondsey Station development, such as current levels of funding and who was the lead officer to contact. The Head of Public Realm assessed that the necessary building blocks for the restructure were now in place.
- 1.15 A member referred to the South Bermondsey development project, in which complications had arisen due to relations with external organisations, and asked if there was now a process in place that would manage relations with external partners.

- 1.16 The Head of Public Realm replied that, with regards to the South Bermondsey project, he was unsure whether the project officers had been working through engineers or dealing directly with external organisations. He stated that unfortunately the council did not have a collective memory for such details and that he was therefore encouraging Public Realm teams to examine and document their communication channels and regular points of contact with external organisations. This practice would thereby strengthen and streamline communication between the council and these organisations. Furthermore, the Head of Public Realm declared that the council needed to move on from its practice of employing project managers on short-term contracts. He assessed that these managers were unaware of the project's history and, once their contract expired and they moved on from the council, information was often lost and not passed onto the replacement project manager.
- 1.17 The chair sought clarification that, under the new structure, Regeneration & Resources project teams will still be responsible for sourcing the funding for their projects, but that project ownership will now be the responsibility of the Public Realm teams. The Head of Public Realm replied that this was correct and that this system would be strengthened through the procurement gateway.
- 1.18 The chair asked whether, if a councillor approached the council and sought match funding for a particular project, the restructure would provide a means to seek this funding. The Head of Public Realm confirmed that the restructure would provide understanding of funding streams and enable councillors to seek funding.
- 1.19 A member suggested that a review of the Public Realm team restructure be conducted at a later date so that members could receive an update on developments. The Head of Public Realm noted that the national improvement plan was scheduled for February 2008. Committee members concluded by commenting favourably on the restructure and stating that the developments sounded very encouraging.

Resolved: To receive an update on restructure developments in early 2008.

2. RENT INCREASES TO COUNCIL ALLOTMENTS

- 2.1 The chair briefly introduced the item and asked the Head of Property to provide further background to the issue.
- 2.2 The Head of Property began by introducing the background to a complaint from the Camberwell Garden Guild (CGG) which had caused the issue of allotments rent levels to be brought to the committee's attention. He explained that the council had served a rent notice to the CGG. The CGG chairman had subsequently objected to the rent notice for a number of reasons, with the main issue being the amount by which the rent had been increased. The Property Contract Manager reported that the council had proposed increasing the CGG's rent from £300 per year to over £1,000 per year.

- 2.3 As part of an explanation as to how the council determined allotment rent levels, the Head of Property stated that the issue was complicated since the council did not actually manage each allotment site. Instead, allotment associations maintain the sites - often according to historic arrangements. The council had previously attempted to determine how much rent it should charge for each allotment site. The subsequent calculation had been based on the council's own figures, as well as external figures, multiplied by the total number of allotment plots, minus a discount for association management fees etc. Using the above formula, a proposed rent level for the CGG had been determined.
- 2.4 The Head of Property reported that, following the complaint from the CGG chairman, the head of portfolio had met with the chairman to hold discussions. They had decided against continuing to negotiate a five yearly open market review. Instead they had offered a flexible lease whereby the allotment site's market value was only reviewed every time the lease was reviewed, and then at review to a figure based on the RPI increase rather than the open market value. Further, the rent increase for the CGG was agreed as an increase from £300 per annum to £350. The Head of Property added that the next step was to standardise leases for all allotment associations.
- 2.5 The chair remarked that, considering the original proposed increase, the CGG had ultimately received a favourable deal. He asked how similar negotiations and moves to establish standardised leases were progressing with other Southwark allotment sites.
- 2.6 The Head of Property confirmed that the council was attempting to standardise its allotment leases across the borough. He noted, however, that a problem still existed with historical leases as the council simply had to wait for the lease to expire before proposing a new standardised version.
- 2.7 The chair asked how many such historical leases still existed. A Property Department Surveyor replied that there were still three allotment sites operating under historical leases.
- 2.8 The Head of Property stated that the council was trying to take a standard approach to all allotment sites, yet also remain flexible during rent review and keep proposals in line with advice from the law society. He also commented that the current approach should serve to save officers' time.
- 2.9 The chair cited the written report on the issue, and referred to the council's endeavour to maintain a minimum 50% local resident ownership level for Southwark allotment plots. The chair asked if, at present, less than 50% of Southwark allotment plot holders were Southwark residents.
- 2.10 The Property Department Surveyor noted that there are currently allotment sites that have less than 50% ownership by Southwark residents. He explained that one such allotment site was located on the border with LB Lewisham, and hence there was a majority of Lewisham residents at this site. He added that Southwark council was currently negotiating with allotment associations and had the aim that Southwark residents should have priority on waiting lists since they were local residents.

- 2.11 The Head of Property added that allotment membership waiting lists were very long. Therefore, if a plot holder moved away to a different borough, they would face a lengthy waiting list to acquire a plot in their new area. Such residents would therefore choose to maintain their plot in Southwark rather than apply for a new one in a new borough.
- 2.12 A member inquired as to whether lease negotiations had gone smoothly with allotment associations whose historical leases had recently expired. In particular, he asked how negotiations with the One Tree Hill association had been.
- 2.13 The Property Department Surveyor replied that negotiations were all progressing well. He pointed out that negotiations with the One Tree Hill association had led to the introduction of the first standardised lease. He explained that the council had recognised that not all the space within the allotment site could be used as garden plots. This was because the council had previously planted trees within the site, in order to reduce erosion. Therefore, the council had accepted that the total area of the site should not reflect the rent, and suitable reductions were made to incorporate the amount of unusable land.
- 2.14 The Head of Property added that allotment sites are protected by planning law. If someone wished to develop on top of an allotment site, then they must provide a replacement site elsewhere within LB Southwark.
- 2.15 The chair inquired as to the current rent level for plots within Dulwich Estates. The Property Department Surveyor replied that plots currently cost £35 each.
- 2.12 The chair concluded by thanking the officers for attending and added that he welcomed the idea of standardised leases and moves to obtain Southwark resident ownership levels of 50%. The chair commented that he was pleased to see that small disputes were being handled amicably.
- 2.13 The chair reminded members that the date of the next sub-committee meeting was 6 February 2008. He noted that an executive interview with councillor Eckersley was scheduled for this meeting. Members determined that interview questions should be submitted by 14 January, and written responses from councillor Eckersley should be submitted by 1 February. In addition to the executive interview, the chair noted that a review of the CRE report, and business continuity at Elephant & Castle would also be agenda items for the February meeting.

The meeting closed at 8:05 pm.

CHAIR:

DATE: