Housing and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Housing and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission held on Tuesday 5 October 2021 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT:	Councillor Gavin Edwards (Chair) Councillor Damian O'Brien Councillor Jon Hartley Councillor Sunny Lambe Councillor Jane Salmon Bassey Bassey (Co-opted member)
OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT:	Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Council Homes and Homelessness. Councillor Victoria Mills and Councillor Renata Hamvas. Councillor Helen Dennis, Cabinet Member for the Climate Emergency and Sustainable Developments
OFFICER SUPPORT:	Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Richard Livingstone and Cris Claridge.

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

There were no items of business which the Chair deemed urgent.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations. The Chair, Councillor Gavin Edwards informed the commission that his spouse, Councillor Victoria Mills is in attendance at this meeting representing Peckham Rye ward.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 12 July 2021 be agreed as a correct record.

5. NEW COUNCIL HOMES ON EXISTING ESTATES - CASE STUDY 1- BRENCHLEY GARDENS

The commission received a report from Owen Thompson, Development Manager, Housing and Modernisation on new council homes on existing estate of Brenchley Gardens. The commission learned that roof-top developments due to their nature of being built on roof tops do cause more concerns amongst residents but they make a significant contribution to the target of delivering new council homes. The consultation strategy was about working with residents closely over the period of the development, schemes such as Brenchley Gardens provide a fantastic opportunity to improve existing estates and meet local housing needs, when compared to the Council's general development offer which has 50% of businesses on the estates, mini-regeneration schemes such as Brenchley Gardens provide an opportunity for building 100% of residential properties on the estates. The commission also learnt that the development and its consultation process had to be put on hold due to the pandemic and was unable to fulfil its full potential.

The commission also heard from Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet member for Council Homes and Homelessness that concerns had been raised by residents over this development with regards to community engagement and consultation within the process; consultations mainly involve in person meetings with residents and door to door canvassing which have not been possible to carry out during the pandemic, hence the decision was taken to pause and reflect on the issues with this development.

Owen then answered the commission's questions on the root cause of the resident complains with regards to officer actions and the lessons learnt from this development project. The commission learned that there was disparity between the information on leaflets, written communication on the benefits of the development issued to the resident and the specific issues being discussed with Tenancy Management Organisation (TMO) which created issues with transparency. Residents were invited to respond through the common place website.

The commission then heard from Councillor Victoria Mills representing Peckham Rye ward that there was no acknowledgment in this report of the Brenchley Gardens estate on the poor handling of the consultation process and unsatisfactory treatment of the residents and the TMO. The commission also learned that the first formal consultation was never held for the residents of Brenchley gardens estate and that the rooftop development was actually first discussed at the Brenchley Gardens Management Association's (BGMA) annual general meeting. In addition the leaflets only spoke about rooftop developments and it was only after the commonplace website consultation was launched that residents were aware of the proposal for an in-fill site. Councillor Mills also explained to the commission there seems to be a lack of understanding within the consultation process on the role of a TMO and council's role to communicate with the wider residents within the estate directly.

The commission next heard from Councillor Renata Hamvas also representing Peckham Rye Ward that the good relationship and trust built with the TMO and the residents over the years has been massively damaged as result of the lack of communication on the in-fill site.

The commission then learned from the representatives of the TMO that there was no indication from council officers that the in-fill site was a part of the development plans and the management committee of the TMO was assured in August that the residents would be extensively consulted on the proposals although letters were not issued till late in December, these letters revealed issues with the proposals. The commonplace website where the consultation was launched suffered from technical issues with its security certificate, which classed it as a fraudulent website causing accessibility issues. Furthermore, the commonplace website was the only mention of the in-fill site and contained only generic information on the leaflets, this caused residents to lose trust in the transparency of the process. The residents also complained about the nature of the questions in the consultation which mainly had drop down options as answers, this led to skewed responses in favour of the proposals. Furthermore, there was no communication with the residents that the in-fill project is no longer being considered and that and the roof-top development project has been paused.

The Chair, Councillor Gavin Edwards then summarised the issues raised by the Ward councillors and the TMO representatives. In response, the commission learned from Owen that the design development team acknowledged issues around the commonplace website and communication with residents, however the report submitted contains evidence that conversations did take place with councillors in the form of shared PowerPoint presentations and that TMO's are a primary vehicle for the development team to gauge public views before it is communicated to wider residents. On the issue of the in-fill sites being unsuitable for development as mentioned by the Ward Councillors, Owen informed the commission that such landscape capacity studies are done by architects who concluded that developments are possible at the two sites on the opposite ends of the estate, however on further investigating both sites were no longer in consideration due to one being sink land and the other having protected trees.

Owen then answered the commission's questions on:

- The issues with communicating to the 95 properties on the estate
- Communication with Ward councillors on development projects

The commission learned that in an attempt to have better responses to the consultation, personalised communication in the form of letters was issued to residents. The commission then agreed that checking and cleansing of residents databases should be an important step in the pre-consultation process. Owen explained to the commission that there is one councillor on every project team and the project teams engage with Ward councillors on a monthly basis.

The commission also learned from Councillor Cryan that there is a robust and comprehensive engagement process in the pipeline which takes residents and members of the public through the entirety of a development project's stages in great detail.

6. COUNCIL PLAN ON BUILDING ZERO CARBON HOUSES

The commission then heard from Councillor Helen Dennis, Cabinet Member for the Climate Emergency and Sustainable Developments on Zero Carbon Housing. On the climate strategy and action plan the commission learned that the published study highlighted the Council's operational emissions across the borough especially with regards to heating and hot water. Zero Carbon housing is critical to achieving the target of Council's net zero commitments by 2030. The commission also noted that due to the withdrawal of the previously proposed Zero Carbon Housing regulations, houses built over the past few years would now have to be retrofitted. The commission also learned that carbon offset funds are critical to actually delivering on net-zero commitments as we push to reduce emissions. The commission also learned that there is an on-going low-rise pilot project at Rotherhithe with an aim to reduce emissions.

The commission then received a report from Juliet Seymour, Head of Building Control Policy in the built environment on Zero Carbon Housing and how carbon assessment is carried out and constantly monitored. Section 106 reports would provide us the necessary data by identifying owners of new developments to provide us the information on whether carbon savings are being met when the building is operational. On monitoring Southwark's performance with regards to compliance when compared to other boroughs, Juliet explained to the commission the different types of monitoring such as carbon offset fund reviewed by the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the Mayor's Office, keeping track of the amount of tonnes of carbon we offset and through planning applications and comparing officer reports to see how different boroughs' are implementing policies to set a bench mark for ourselves.

In response to the commission's questions on effective spending of the carbon offset fund Councillor Dennis explained to the commission that funding would have to be focused on specific projects where savings can be achieved at scale. Buildings are the highest carbon emitters making them the easiest way to offset carbon, there is an on-going review into exact price of offsetting in Southwark. Officers across the council departments are working together at different levels; strategic directors, heads of service and project delivery forums to deliver on the council's carbon zero commitments. The commission also learnt that there are on-going pilots to develop district heating networks in certain areas through insulated pipelines. The commission learnt that there exists a planning time lag of 24 to 36 months from the design stage to building completion on zero carbon houses due to regulations and planning processes, at which stage the technology becomes obsolete. Contractors are still not on board because of costs of green technology and lack of skills within the work force.

7. WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22

The report was noted by the commission and the Chair informed the commission the need for an additional meeting before the end of the calendar year to ensure the commission is able to cover all the agenda items in its work programme for the year 2021/22.

Meeting ended at 9.19 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: