



OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the CALL IN meeting of the OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on 1 NOVEMBER 2004 at 7.00 p.m. at Southwark Town Hall, Peckham Road, London SE5 8UB

PRESENT: Councillor Kim HUMPHREYS [Chair]
Catriona MOORE, Fiona COLLEY, Andy SIMMONS, Barrie HARGROVE, Anne YATES, Eliza MANN,

MEMBERS: Cllr ZULETA, Gavin O'BRIEN, Peter JOHN, Alfred BANYA

OFFICERS: Stephanie Dunstan – Scrutiny Project Manager
Shelley Burke – Head of Overview and Scrutiny
Stuart Hoggan – Head of Corporate Strategy
Glen Egan – Assistant Borough Solicitor
Keith Broxup – Strategic Director of Housing
Christos Pishios – Project Manager Housing
Cliff Robinson – Head of Income Management
Chris Brown – Head of Housing Management

PUBLIC: Pat Topley – Tenants Council
Nancy Horwood – Southwark Group Tenants Organisation
Doreen Gee – Heygate/Rodney Rd
Bernard Constable – Rodney Rd
Y.B.Deller – SGTO
Piers Corbyn – Alvey TO
Kim Jones – SGTO
Tony Mc Carthy – Alfred Salter Vice Chair
Tom West

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None were received

CONFIRMATION OF VOTING MEMBERS

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

DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Cllr Yates declared that she was a resident of the Bermondsey area. The Assistant Borough Solicitor advised that this was a personal, not prejudicial interest in the item.

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 is available for public inspection.

The 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.

1. **Call in: Individual Decision [20th October] in respect of Various Recommendations received from Neighbourhood Forums on proposed amendments to the new Housing Area Forum and Tenants Council Constitutions.**

Cllr Humphreys [Chair] declared the meeting open at 7.00pm.

There was a general discussion about the nature of Individual Decision Making (IDM) and the potential for call-ins on IDM items because stakeholders are only aware of the item after the decision has been taken. Members and tenants council residents commented that it was difficult to know what decisions were forthcoming.

The Chair invited the deputation from the Southwark Groups Tenants Organisation [SGTO].

Nancy Horwood [SGTO] thanked the Chair and told the Committee that the SGTO feel it is very important that 'Alfred Salter' be included in the Bermondsey One-Stop Shop name. She commented that an alternative for the Council could be 'Bermondsey Alfred Salter One Stop Shop' or 'Alfred Salter Bermondsey One Stop Shop'. She also told the Committee that it was concerning that the officer report which went to the Executive decision maker hadn't taken into account the reasons the Tenants Council wanted to include the 'Alfred Salter' name.

Ellen Brown told the Committee that Dr. Alfred Salter had been very important in the Bermondsey area and it was important to honour his memory. She stressed to the Committee that it was not just about a name, but the memory of a man who had done a lot for the Bermondsey community. By having his name in the Bermondsey One Stop Shop it would ensure that a piece of Bermondsey history is retained. She asked the Committee what was the point of having a Tenants Council if members did not listen to the Tenants Council but just went with officer recommendations?

Cllr Simmons asked if new residents to the Bermondsey area, who don't know the history of the area, would be happy with the name Alfred Salter included in the one stop shop? For example, would resident from Cherry Gardens support you?

Ellen Brown commented that residents identify the area as the Alfred Salter area and that calling it something else would be very confusing. She told the Committee that Alfred Salter is a reference point, exemplified by residents asking bus drivers to drop them at the 'Alfred Salter'. Cherry Gardens residents also support that the Bermondsey One Stop shop have this name.

Cllr Simmons asked if the SGTO were aware of this IDM in advance of the decision occurring?

Nancy Horwood said that the first they were made aware of it was when the decision was published, even though they had been checking the forward plan. They had contacted housing officers who had commented that they were unfamiliar with the IDM process, which indicated that if housing officers find the process difficult to understand then it is even more difficult for members of the public. She also commented that it was difficult for members of the public to download all the agenda papers from the internet and sometimes needed assistance doing this, in the form of particular computer software.

Peirs Corban [Alvey Tenants Association] told the Committee that the tenants were concerned with the new tenants area forum boundaries and wanted to keep the forum boundaries as they were. He commented that the East Walworth forum is now much too large and restricts tenants from attending their 'natural' forums, which would be the forum closest to their home. An issue with the new housing forum areas is that tenants face the risk of being excluded on key issues. Additional problems are accessibility for tenants to attend the housing forum meetings due to distance and safety at night. This then raises the issue of accessibility to the meetings for Black and Ethnic Minority groups.

Doreen Gee [Heygate/Rodeny Rd TA] addressed the Committee and told them that proper consultation on the new housing area forums had not occurred. Tenants originally had told the Housing Department that they would be happy if the Aylesbury estate got its own housing forum but only if the Walworth area had four forums. She commented that Aylesbury had many forthcoming issues and it needed to be ensured that the tenants had a voice. It was concerning that tenants were now having to risk their own safety to attend housing forums.

Bernard Constable [Rodney Rd TA] told the Committee that currently tenants council meetings went till 10pm, and with the new forums area it could mean meetings could go till 12am. The Council should be aware that the new housing area forums will discourage tenants from attending due to the length of the meetings. He reminded the Committee that tenants volunteer enormous time and effort to tenants council and should value the work of these volunteers.

Nancy Horwood told the Committee that none of the tenants knew the decision on restructuring the tenants council area forums was coming, even though they had been watching the forward plan to check for forthcoming relevant decisions. She acknowledged that tenants council needed to look at ways of ensuring all voices of the community are represented and had commissioned research on this topic. However the tenants council had decided that any future representation would be based on proportional representation. She asked why Southwark had a tenants council if they ignore their decisions and instead chose the recommendation of a housing officer? It is the tenants council that should decide how to be represented not housing officers. It is also illogical for the tenants council to be compared to the leaseholder council, which was done in the IDM report. She suggested that the Executive Member should withdraw that part of the decision and work in partnership with the Tenants council to decide the best way to improve representation.

The Chair thanked the residents for their deputation and invited questions from the Committee.

Cllr Colley asked how the tenants council envisioned proportional representation occurring? Nancy Horwood replied that the whole system needs to be looked at, but it was wrong to compare it to leaseholders council. She suggested that the way forward was to look at the issues facing proportional representation before setting up a system, rather than setting up a system then examining the issues.

Cllr Colley asked the Executive Member for Housing and Community Safety what consultation he had conducted with regards to the naming of the Bermondsey West One stop shop.

Cllr O'Brien [Executive Member for Housing and Community Safety] commented that he didn't want to cause disrespect to Dr. Salter, but needed to have a standard in naming one stop shops or else he would have many requests to change the names of other official Council buildings. He commented that he had spoken with Cllr Gurling about using Dr. Salters name in the post offices. Cllr Yates asked why a compromise name of Bermondsey West Alfred Salter One Stop Shop couldn't be reached? Cllr O'Brien repeated that the Council needed to be consistent with its naming policies and that a review could be conducted in 12 months time.

There was a general discussion about the difficulties of IDM in alerting interested members of the public of upcoming decisions. Members of the public commented that it was difficult to find out what decisions were forthcoming under IDM on the internet as well as it being difficult to download IDM information from the internet without having the correct software. Cllr Peter John told the Committee that their had been an IDM working party where it was agreed that forthcoming IDM decisions would be advertised on the internet, however this case had highlighted that this process needed to be reviewed.

Cllr Hargrove commented that although he had lived in Peckham all his life, he did not know a separate area in Bermondsey as 'Bermondsey West'. He commented that having a review in 12 months time was not good enough, when it was obvious there was issues currently with the name.

Cllr Mann asked if the TRA have computer facilities? Cllr O'Brien commented that computer facilities were available in a range of TRA offices, and in some cases have an officer available to help use the computers.

Cllr Colley asked Cllr O'Brien when do the Executive decide on the new area forums? Can the name of the forum for Bermondsey West be moved? Why was the Walworth forum boundary based on a ward boundary? And who do you think should run the tenants council? The tenants or the Council?

Cllr O'Brien responded that their needed to be consistency in naming of the area forums, that using the Walworth Ward boundaries were the best way forward and that it is the tenants that lead the tenants council.

The Chair asked about recommendation 3 of the IDM, where it was not agreed to amend the boundaries of the 3 Area Forums in the Walworth Housing Area. Chris Brown replied that it was not recommended because it involved three separate housing estates.

RESOLVED:

1. Notes that tenants and residents were not notified in advanced of the decision to be made by the Executive member for Housing and Community Safety and that they therefore did not have an opportunity to make their views known on the report
2. Notes the wider concerns of members of Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) at the implementation of Individual Executive Member Decision Making and asks the Borough Solicitor to report back to OSC on how to improve the timing of decision making to minimise need for call-ins, and to improve information flows to stakeholders so they know prior to Individual Decisions being made and have the opportunity to comment.
3. Recommends that the Executive Members for Housing and Community Safety consider a compromise on the name of the West Bermondsey Area Forum and Bermondsey one-stop shop which includes the name Alfred Salter.
4. Recommends that the Executive Member for Housing and Community Safety consider moving King Lakes and Alvey estates from the Walworth East Area forum into the Walworth central area forum.
5. Recommends that the Executive Member for Housing and Community safety consider that each Area Forum had two delegates and two deputies, until such time as changes to membership are agreed by the Council and the Tenants Council.

2. Call in: Individual Decision [26th October] in respect of Modernising Face to Face Services – Bermondsey Cash Office

The Chair opened the item and invited the deputation from Nancy Horwood.

Nancy Horwood told the Committee that none of the residents groups were aware the decision was to be taken under the IDM scheme; and that the figures on post office usage in the report appear to be incorrect. She commented that although the Council is promoting alternatives to use of cash offices such as post offices, at the same time post offices in the borough are closing down. There is also the issue of tenants experiencing a delay when using post offices to pay rents, with some postmasters seeming to take a long time to bank money received.

Ellen Brown told the Committee that the Alfred Salter office is very busy with many residents using the office to pay rents, often resulting in very long queues. She commented that she did not believe the figures in the report and that the Council should ask residents were they would like to pay their rents, rather than telling them. The issue for older residents is that not all of them hold bank accounts, and therefore cannot use some of the alternative cash pay points. Additionally older residents will not like walking to the alternative cash office points with lots of cash.

The Chair thanked the residents for their deputations and asked the Committee if they had any questions.

Cllr Simmons noted that he had complaints from some residents that not all payment points had adequate disabled access. Nancy Horwood commented that she thought the Council would not meet all of its responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act, especially in some of the sub – post offices where residents are not being encouraged to pay rents.

There was a general discussion about using Bermondsey Town Hall as a cash office and the renovation costs that would be associated making the Town Hall meet insurance standards and disability standards.

Cllr Colley commented that she was disappointed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had called the decision back in December due to lack of consultation, and needed to call the decision in again because of a continued lack of consultation. Additionally the report did not have enough analysis on the effect of post office closures in the borough, nor did it ask tenants how they would like to pay their rents. Finally, it appeared contradictory that the Council publicly criticised the Post Office for lack of consultation on branch closures, yet it doesn't consult effectively on closure of cash offices.

Cllr Zuleta responded that the original IDM report on this item had come to her in September, however she had requested that officers supply her with more information, including the effect of post office closures. The additional information she had requested had been included in appendices to the report. Cllr Zuleta had also asked officers for an analysis of payment uses at all of the Council cash offices, and handed a copy of this report to Committee members. She highlighted that contrary to what residents had told the Committee, the Spa Rd cash office had the lowest use and had dropped by 4000 transactions between April – Oct when the option to use alternative pay points had been introduced. Cllr Zuleta commented that because the Council had committed to a modernisation program, this involved closing cash offices and promoting non alternative payment points. She commented that she was concerned to hear that at some post offices rent was not being banked immediately and tenants were receiving rent arrears notices.

Cllr Simmons asked why money had not been put aside to make Bermondsey Town Hall accessible to the standards required by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)? Cllr Zuleta and Cliff Robinson told the Committee that the costs required to meet the standards for the DDA were very high, and combined with the costs required to meet insurance standards, did not make using the Bermondsey Town Hall as a cash office effective. Additionally it was important to keep in mind that the Council had embarked on a modernisation program, based on a best value review, which had recommended to close cash offices

Cllr Simmons asked if there was any information if residents like the alternative cash payment options? Cliff Robinson replied that as yet no customer service satisfaction surveys had been completed, however these sorts of questions could be incorporated into future reviews.

There was a general discussion about the status of the Post Office Urban Reinvention Programme and proposed closures in the Borough. The Chair updated the Committee with information he had received from an officer earlier in the evening, that it was thought that Abbey St, Crystal Palace Rd and Rosendale Rd would close and Herne Hill will relocate. The only post office that may stay open would be Bermondsey Post Office. Cllr Simmons asked why the Council couldn't work with the post offices with regards to receiving Council payments. Cliff Robinson told the Committee that post offices & central government were also moving to only accepting non cash payments, and promoting direct debit. Members of the public commented that some residents do not have bank accounts and the Council will always need to ensure that it has options to accept cash payments.

Cliff Robinson offered to report back to the Committee on the allegations that some sub – post offices were not banking residents money immediately, causing arrears, and to also forward this information to members of the public.

Cllr Colley commented that that the consultation on this item had not been effective as the tenants did not know anything about the proposed closures. This was particularly concerning considering that Cllr Zuleta had received a report on the item in September. Cllr Zuleta responded that the decision was on the forward plan and this was confirmed by Cliff Robinson. There was a general discussion again about the issues facing IDM and suggestions that a report from Constitutional Support comes back to OSC about ways to improve consultation on IDM.

RESOLVED:

1. Notes that no consultation has taken place on the decisions made by the Executive Member for Resources
2. Asks that the Executive Member:
 - a) Investigate complaints by local residents that same pay-points and pay-zones are not banking payments promptly leading to tenants running into arrears and report back to OSC within two months;
 - b) Investigate the accessibility for disabled people of premises providing the pay-point and pay-zone facility;
 - c) Carry out a customer satisfaction survey to investigate the preferences of tenants and residents for making payments;
 - d) Work with the Post Office to consider alternative provision for cash payments in the local area in the light of the Urban Post Office Re-invention programme and possible closure of Crown Offices and ensures that officers report back to OSC by February 2005.

The meeting ended at 9.30 p.m.

CHAIR'S SIGNATURE:

DATED: