

Economic Regeneration, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes

Tuesday 1 November 2016

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Daryl Brown, Adam Connell and Alan De'Ath (Chair)

Other Councillors: Ben Coleman, Andrew Jones, Wesley Harcourt and Lisa Homan

Officers Presenting Reports: Mike Clarke, Antonia Hollingsworth, Labab Lubab and Helen Worwood

20. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Harry Phibbs.

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

22. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 September were agreed to be accurate.

23. HIGH STREETS REVIEW

Antonia Hollingsworth, Principal Business Investment Officer, explained that the borough had 29 shopping areas which ranged from town centre high streets to small parades and clusters of shops. High streets were currently facing a number of challenges, key ones being: the rise of internet shopping;

the 31% increase in rateable values in 2010; multiple ownership of shopping areas, and; the relative ease of converting a shop to a residential property under national planning policies. Despite these challenges shopping areas in Hammersmith and Fulham were coping reasonably well. Vacancy rates for retail units across the borough were about average for London at just over 10%, although the rate on high streets was lower at about 8.5%.

Antonia Hollingsworth explained that the PAC had previously asked that officers do more to support North End and Bloemfontein Roads. She said that at North End Road officers had:

- Supported the North End Road Action Group (NERAG)
- Facilitated five traffic free markets
- Ensured that its 8 retail units on the road were let.

The work of NERAG, with help from the council, had led to 600 new opportunities to trade, between 10-15,000 people visiting each market, and 'trade for a tenner' opportunities. A Business Improvement District proposal was being developed for Fulham, and this would include North End Road.

Turning to talk about Bloemfontein Road, Antonia Hollingsworth explained that the council was in the fortunate position of owning the whole parade of 15 shops at Bloemfontein Road. 14 of the retail units were let, with the remaining shop currently under offer. A new supermarket had increased competition in the area, but shops had so far survived the impact well. The shop at 75 Bloemfontein Road was being used as a community hub which hosted both a foodbank and a CAB adviser; this was part of the council's commitment to deliver social inclusion.

Mark Richardson, member of NERAG, explained that the group's North End Road Market Facebook page had 1,400 followers and its online communications had reached 29,000 people in the last month. He said that reduced rate stalls such as 'trade for a tenner' had not been particularly successful, however, they were important schemes to encourage new businesses to join the market. There were a number of important issues still affecting North End Road which were: narrow pavements and traffic using the road during the market; insufficient parking for traders and shoppers; there being no public toilets on the street; the lack of power supplies and storage facilities for market traders, and; poor waste disposal arrangements. He said that North End Road had improved significantly over the past few years, but felt that solving some of these problems would be important in ensuring that it thrived as a high street.

A market trader said that parking for shoppers was the problem which most affected her business. Antonia Hollingsworth said that the parking on Coomer Place was designed for shoppers. The market trader said that Coomer Place was very helpful, but that there wasn't enough parking in the area, especially during the residents only period between 2 and 4pm. Councillor Coleman, Cabinet Member for Commercial Revenue and Resident Satisfaction and Ward Councillor for Fulham Broadway, said that there was clearly an issue with the parking controls and that a consultation was planned for 2017. Unfortunately the consultation had been delayed from 2016 because consultations in other CPZs had been more complicated than originally

expected. Councillor Andrew Jones, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration, explained that changes to the CPZ hours would require support from the community and said that it was vital that everyone responded to the consultation.

A resident asked if there had been a survey on how shoppers got to the market. Mark Richardson explained that the recent NERAG survey had not included transport, however most respondents had lived within walking distance of the market. A resident pointed out that it wasn't always possible for those who lived nearby to walk to the market, as they might not be able to carry what they had bought. The Chair suggested that more research on this issue might be helpful.

A resident said that there was an issue with shops displaying goods on the pavement. Councillor Jones noted that on some parts of the street the shops owned a certain amount of land in front of their shops and so could legally trade there. There were very few controls the council could introduce to resolve this problem and felt that it would be best dealt with through a better relationship between shops, market traders and shoppers.

A market trader said that some types of market stalls had historical rights to trade, however, their businesses could be damaged by shops opening and selling the same products as them. Councillor Jones said that in the current laissez faire planning regime the council could not control, except by using broad use classes. Councillor Coleman explained that shops suffered a loss of trade when market stalls closed so there was scope for businesses to work together to support one another.

Sarah-Jane Johnson felt that some shops and traders needed to be more customer focussed, reducing queues and maybe doing demonstrations to attract more people to shop with them.

In response to questions Antonia Hollingsworth explained that a Business Improvement District (BID) was being proposed in Fulham. This was not being led by the council but officers and councillors were supportive of the proposal. Businesses would be given a vote on whether to create a BID which would levy a small amount of money from each shop and then spend it to improve the area.

A resident was concerned that one of the bus stops on North End Road had been closed for some time. Councillor Harcourt, Cabinet Member for Environment, Transport and Residents Services, agreed to look into this.

A resident noted that the council wanted Hammersmith and Fulham to become the greenest borough in London and asked how this would affect North End Road. Councillor Jones said that the traffic free markets had reduced traffic in the area and he felt that restricting traffic, perhaps to buses only, might in the medium to long term be necessary. Facilities for cyclists and pedestrians needed to be improved as well. Councillor Harcourt said that there would be electric car club spaces introduced in the area as part of a new scheme to introduce 180 across the borough.

Councillor Jones said that the administration's vision for North End Road was:

- to have a thriving market which attracted shoppers to the street
- to have improved the streetscape and infrastructure in North End Road, working with developers to achieve this
- to have shops let more quickly by other landlords with the council using innovative approaches to do this.

There was general agreement that this vision was a good one, but it was felt that action on small issues was needed quickly to help achieve it. Councillor Jones said that some parts of the vision would take time to introduce, although where possible things would be done quickly; the parking consultation would take place in 2017 whilst work to reduce the vacancy rate through contacting landlords and applying vinyl to shopfronts etc had already started.

Councillor Connell asked what had been learned from Bloemfontein and North End Roads which could be applied to other areas. Councillor Jones said that having strategies for areas was important as was engaging stakeholders, including landlords. Making a shopping centre a destination, as the traffic free markets had done, was important to increasing trade. Antonia Hollingsworth said that the council had developed its business advice learning from the experience of shops at Bloemfontein Road.

Councillor Coleman asked that residents vote in the h&f Brilliant Business Awards before Sunday 6 November.

24. CREATION OF H&F SOCIAL LETTINGS AGENCY

Councillor Homan, Cabinet Member for Housing, explained that the administration had suggested the creation of a social lettings agency in response to the problem of poor maintenance by leaseholders who were sub-letting their properties. The idea had been that if the council could offer an attractive property management service and get leaseholders in council blocks to use it, it would be easier to ensure that maintenance work was done properly. The model also had other very attractive features; it would allow the council to influence the private rented market, upon which the council and residents relied heavily for accommodation, and would also help the council build up a portfolio of accommodation for people with special needs, such as wheelchair users. She explained that she would welcome residents comments on the proposal.

Labab Lubab, Housing Opportunities Manager, explained that quite a few councils had now set up social lettings agencies of different types and these had had varying degrees of success. The essence of a social lettings agency was that it would focus on sustaining tenancies, which wasn't necessarily the most profitable option for commercial lettings agents. Mr Lubab explained that there was little regulation of lettings agents, alongside huge demand for housing and that this allowed some agents to be quite unscrupulous. The council's entry into the market would allow it to compete with these agents and drive up standards. Labab Lubab explained that the council already had a very good housing property procurement service and that the social lettings

agency would build on the knowledge and contacts which had already been built up. There were many property owners who were keen to work with the council because of its good reputation, gained from being the borough's largest landlord. The proposal was expected to generate income for the council over the medium term, as a profit could be made on providing the service; this profit could be used to subsidise cheaper housing for those in need. If the social lettings agency was successful in sustaining tenancies then this would also reduce demand for housing advice and assistance. Labab Lubab explained that the effectiveness of the social lettings agency would be reviewed after one year of operation.

A resident said that if rent control hadn't been removed in the 1980s a social lettings agency would not be necessary. Councillor Connell noted that this was out of the control of local councils.

Councillor Connell asked whether securing 500 units in the first year was feasible and if there was a financial risk to the council if the agency did not hit its targets. Labab Lubab said that whilst 500 units was an ambitious target it was an achievable one as 10,000 properties were put up for let each year in Hammersmith and Fulham alone; he said that the agency could also take on properties outside of the borough which meant even more might be available to the social lettings agency. There was a risk to the council of approximately £200,000 but it was expected that even if the agency did not achieve its aims it should be able to break even.

Councillor Homan explained that she was confident that the scheme would be successful. A great deal of research had been done into the best possible model for a social lettings agency. Labab Lubab said that he had visited several social lettings agencies to learn from their successes and the challenges they faced to give Hammersmith and Fulham's agency the best chance of success. Councillor Homan explained that the landlords forum had been consulted about the proposal and had been quite supportive. Labab Lubab said that there were a number of landlords already interested in working with the social lettings agency.

A resident how universal credit would impact on the social lettings agency. Labab Lubab explained that the council offered excellent support through its Housing Benefit Assist service for those being moved to universal credit. Councillor Homan explained that Hammersmith and Fulham was a pilot area for universal credit and that the roll out so far had been reasonably successful; she didn't expect there to be a significant impact on the social lettings agency.

A resident asked whether repairs could be undertaken in leasehold properties not under the management of the council. Labab Lubab explained that the council had some limited powers but that these were far more difficult to use than if the council were the managing agent.

Councillor Holder asked whether the scheme might be extended to allow residents to let out spare rooms to lodgers. Councillor Homan noted that this had been suggested by a number of people recently, but that the scheme

would not include the opportunity at its launch; more research into the idea was needed before a decision on letting out rooms to lodgers could be taken.

25. OPEN DOORS: ENSURING A THRIVING LIBRARY SERVICE IN HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM

Councillor Harcourt, Cabinet Member for Environment, Transport and Residents Services, explained that the council was committed to keeping all of its libraries open. The administration had pledged to modernise and widen the appeal of libraries and this report updated the committee on the work which had been done since its July meeting.

Mike Clarke explained that the work to modernise and widen the appeal of the council's libraries also included work to make them more sustainable financially and protect them for the future. One of the ideas to do this had been to pass responsibilities for the libraries to a trust, however, this was not being taken forward because at present the costs and risks of such a move outweighed its benefits. Savings were also being planned for the elements of the libraries service shared with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster City Council; Hammersmith and Fulham would save £90,000 as a result of these efficiencies. The council was looking to bring in more revenue through its libraries, for example by selling hot drinks and stationery, renting out space to organisations which provided services which would complement existing library services, increasing the number of lettings to groups, and by holding weddings at Fulham Library. Mike Clarke said that the council wanted to use volunteers to do more in libraries, not replacing paid staff, but providing extra services. Work had begun to ensure that volunteers were given the support they needed.

A resident noted that there was scaffolding up at Hammersmith Library and asked what was being done. Mike Clarke explained that the roof was being repaired and that these works would be completed in the near future.

Karen Blackwell, Library Assistant at Fulham Library, said that she did not feel weddings were being advertised well enough. Mike Clarke agreed and said that this was being dealt with. Karen Blackwell said that there was also an issue with cleaning by Amey. Councillor Coleman asked that he be passed the details as it was important that contractors be held to their contract standards.

Councillor Coleman asked whether any work had been done commercialising the council's extensive archive. Helen Worwood said that a business case had been developed for digitising old photos of the borough and then selling prints of these, however, the initial outlay was high and the income was very uncertain. Councillor Coleman asked to be sent the business case. Mike Clarke explained that the idea of using items as props in filming seemed unlikely to work as there were not many suitable items in the archive. It was noted that filming in libraries had to be balanced against the provision of the library service.

Mark Richardson said that he felt the Hammersmith and Fulham Libraries Facebook page ought to be more varied; at the moment it seemed to mostly promote children's activities when there was much more going on in libraries.

Antonia Hollingsworth, Principal Business Investment Officer, said that she had previously suggested a scheme to provide business information through libraries. Mike Clarke suggested that this be explored outside of the meeting. Councillor Harcourt noted that a Workary, a co-working hub for business start ups and flexible working, was being set up in Kensington and Chelsea and that if that seemed successful it would provide other opportunities for small businesses in libraries.

26. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING AND WORK PROGRAMME

Those present noted that the next meeting would be held on Tuesday 13 December 2016 at 7pm in the Small Hall.

The PAC work programme was noted.

Meeting started: 7.05 pm
Meeting ended: 9.10 pm

Chair

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