

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

Tuesday 7 March 2017

PRESENT

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

Other Councillors: Lisa Homan and Stephen Cowan

38. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Lucy Ivimy.

39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

40. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 January were agreed to be accurate.

41. GREENING OUR ESTATES

Councillor De'Ath explained that the council wanted to be the greenest council in the country and that there had been many initiatives across different service areas to help achieve this. There had been a number of projects to make estates greener and he invited Sharon Schaaf to present the work to the committee.

Sharon Schaaf explained that the council had implemented green roofs, tree and wildflower planting, rainwater gardens, swales and food growing projects

at many of the estates in the borough. The first projects had begun in 2012/13 with Flora Gardens being the first project. From 2013/14 larger schemes began at the Queen Caroline and Maystar Estates and at Cyril Thatcher and Richard Knight Sheltered Accommodation Blocks. The schemes included a 25% increase in permeable surfaces, 20,000m³ of water retention capacity, 600 trees, green roofs, food growing areas and water harvesting systems. These schemes were partially funded through the EU Life+ project. The projects had also involved residents in the changes being made to their estates and this had been a key part of their success; there had since been many applications for further environmental improvements as a result of the enthusiasm generated. Some of the schemes had been recognised with a number of awards from the Landscape Institute, including the EU Life+ schemes winning the Fellows' Award for Climate Change Adaptation.

A resident of Millshot Close said that the scheme there was very impressive; he had noticed passers by stopping to take photographs of the new landscaping. Another resident said that the scheme had also had social benefits, bringing the community together; he said that the council needed to fund this type of scheme well as their results were greatly valued by residents.

A resident of Queen Caroline Estate said that the project there had brought the wider community together, not just those who were residents of the estate. The Sustainable Drainage (SuDS) elements of the scheme had also proven to be very effective.

A resident asked whether the schemes were designed to encourage wildlife and biodiversity. Sharon Schaaf explained that the council did consider what could be done to improve biodiversity; planting was planned to provide habitats and bird-boxes had been installed in some schemes. There was however a balance to be struck between making the projects useable for residents and good for wildlife; for example, some trees were great for wildlife but dropped sticky residue on cars and so wouldn't be used in a car park. The council had recently established a Biodiversity Commission which, it was hoped, would make recommendations on how biodiversity could be further encouraged.

A resident said that the project on the Maystar Estate had led to a group of residents getting together each week to do gardening. The group had recently benefitted from GoodGym members turning over some hard ground so that it could be used for more planting. She felt however that the council needed to give more information to residents about how to care for the new plants they put in during the scheme.

A resident noted that only 20% of the 1000 whips planted in 2011/12 were thought to have survived. She asked whether such a low rate was usual. Gavin Simmons explained that this was quite normal for whips, which were very young trees. It was also common practice to plant a number of fast growing whips to protect a slower growing tree and for the protective trees to then be removed once they had done their job.

A resident said that the swales at Verulam House had not been planted yet, and questioned whether the council was doing enough for smaller blocks. Sharon Schaaf agreed to look into the specific issue at Verulam House; she explained that smaller sites had been selected for the EU Life+ scheme to prove that it was viable to implement greening schemes in smaller blocks and that it was hoped that more similar schemes could be completed. Residents could also seek money from the Neighbourhood Improvement Fund to do this type of work. A resident explained that the Investment Group had recently approved Neighbourhood Improvement bids from Verulam House. Daniel Miller agreed to contact the resident to provide further details of these.

Councillor Connell asked whether the scheme would be able to carry on after Britain had left the EU, noting that much of the funding had been provided through the EU Life+ scheme. Sharon Schaaf explained that at the moment the council could still bid for funds, but that alternative options would need to be sought. George Warren explained that the council was trying to get Thames Water to fund SuDS schemes on housing estates. It was hoped that this would bring many of the benefits of the previously implemented schemes to the remaining estates.

Councillor Phibbs said that SuDS schemes seemed to be very good value as a relatively small amount of money could have a massive impact both on the environment and on communities. He suggested that spending the money which Thames Water had allocated for the Counter's Creek on SuDS schemes would be a much better use of it.

Councillor Phibbs said that the policy for the replacement of trees on housing estates was different to the policy for street trees; tree pits on housing estates might be left empty if the existing tree were to die, whilst had the tree been on a street maintained by highways it would have been replaced. He said that he felt the report ought to have made this clearer. A number of residents raised specific sites where trees had not been replaced, both on streets and on housing estates.

Sharon Schaaf said that the policy on housing estates was different as more needed to be considered when replacing a tree on a housing estate. Sometimes replacing dead trees might not be appropriate, for example if it was causing nuisance to residents or if a new tree was unlikely to survive in the position. Over the past few years the number of trees on housing estates had risen from 3,900 to 4,500, so the total number of trees was increasing quickly.

A resident suggested that a review of all trees on housing estates be carried out with a view to increasing the number of trees. Another resident suggested that estate inspections already looked at trees and that it was easier for residents to suggest new locations for trees. The Chair asked whether the council knew where trees on housing estates were. Gavin Simmons explained that there were accurate records for most of the council's estates but that there were some gaps. He said that he wanted residents to tell him where trees would be appreciated and not be a nuisance.

A resident asked whether there was a policy that required the council to notify residents and housing officers when trees were going to be removed. Sharon Schaaf said that this would normally happen, although where a tree was posing a serious health and safety risk it might be removed without notice. A resident suggested that notices be put up on any trees where changes were proposed. Gavin Simmons said that this was a good idea which was already used on street trees.

The Chair asked whether there were any further suggestions of what else the council should be doing to make estates greener. Councillor Homan said that the administration would be very receptive to new ideas to help put estates at the centre of Hammersmith and Fulham being the Greenest Borough. Residents suggested that more greening projects should be carried out and that smaller 'snagging' issues should be resolved more quickly.

Councillor Phibbs proposed that the committee should recommend that 'trees on housing estates should be replaced on the same general basis as street trees'. The Leader of the Council said that he agreed with Councillor Phibbs but felt that the recommendation might miss the opportunity to make estates even greener and suggested that the PAC's recommendation be that 'trees on housing estates should be replaced at least on the same general basis as street trees'. This amendment was accepted by the PAC and so it was:

RESOLVED

That the PAC recommend that trees on housing estates should be replaced at least on the same general basis as street trees.

A resident asked that hanging baskets be installed on Hammersmith Bridge Road. Councillor Homan noted that this was not within the PAC's remit but agreed to raise it with the relevant officers.

A resident noted that there was a scheme to enlarge Jepson House, where a green roof had previously been planned. He asked whether the sheds at Jepson House would be replaced. Councillor Homan said that she had asked officers to look into this.

42. UPDATE ON THE STOCK TRANSFER

Councillor Homan apologised that she would have to leave the meeting for a short period during the consideration of this item because of an urgent issue.

Kath Corbett explained that in December 2015 the Cabinet had agreed to pursue a stock transfer, subject to the availability of funding and the negotiation of a satisfactory financial settlement with the government. The government had now decided that it would not support stock transfers with debt write offs. All previous stock transfers, including three in March 2015, had been funded with debt write offs, under the previous Housing Stock Transfer manual which expired in March 2016; Kath Corbett explained that the report had contained a typographical error about the date of the previous transfers. The government had also failed to publish a new Stock Transfer

Manual which was required to progress the proposed transfer. The Council and Shadow Board had explored a range of alternative funding options and ways that the transfer could be progressed but these had not been successful. The Council would not therefore be pursuing the transfer any further.

The Leader of the Council explained that when he had been Leader of the Opposition housing estates in the borough had been sold by the Council, often at what he considered to be bargain basement prices. Leaseholders who lived on the West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates were unlikely to be able to continue to live in Hammersmith and Fulham, whilst older leaseholders may not be able to buy again as mortgage providers would not be keen to take them on. Tenants would also suffer, being moved from their homes to other sites. The Council was now trying to renegotiate the deal to make it fairer to residents.

To avoid this happening again the council had wanted to give residents control of their homes and the Residents Commission on Council Housing had suggested that a stock transfer to a community gateway housing association would be the best way to do this. Stock transfers were then being supported by the government and so the proposal was pursued. The government now seemed to oppose stock transfers and so it would be impossible to progress the scheme. The Council would be challenging the government on their change of view. The Council had also set up the resident-led Defend Council Homes Unit which would be working to find other ways to protect residents homes.

A resident asked whether politicians opposed to the plan had lobbied the government to change its views on stock transfers. The Leader said that he didn't know why the government had changed its policy.

A resident noted that Inside Housing had reported the decision to stop work on the stock transfer on 1 March and asked why the press had been told before residents. The Leader explained that the agenda for the PAC had been published, as required by law, 5 clear days before the meeting; as the report explained that work on the transfer had been stopped it was likely that that was how they had got their story.

A number of residents asked what the Defend Council Homes Unit would do and how it be accountable to residents. The Leader explained that the unit's task would be to think of new ways to defend homes; it would be structured in a similar way to a commission, with Shirley Cupit acting as its chair. The Defend Council Homes Unit would decide on its own recruitment process for further members, but it was expected to seek wide engagement. The unit would submit proposals to the Council as soon as it was able to.

A resident said that they felt that the Council had, under both the present and the previous administrations, failed to focus sufficiently on providing services to those living in council properties. He felt that the arguments between political parties had distracted from the improvements to the stock and new homes which were needed. At the Phoenix Housing Association in Lewisham

this distraction had not existed and services had seemed much better than in Hammersmith and Fulham when he had visited as part of the engagement in the work of the Residents Commission. The Leader of the Council said that politics made a difference and gave residents the chance to choose what future they wanted. He explained that the Council had spent much time and energy over the past few years improving services and making them more resident focussed, which he hoped had been noticed. The Council had asset management plans to ensure that the existing housing stock was properly maintained and also had plans to build 600 new homes by the end of 2019. The Leader explained that there were still problems with contracts which would take time to get right, and that the government imposed rent cut would make it harder to deliver everything which residents wanted. Residents also explained that feedback from estate inspections was now being used to improve the asset management plan, and that the Residents Commission had set out a Blueprint for improvements to services which the council had made significant progress towards.

A resident said that more needed to be done to engage residents and explain the improvements which had been made. It was felt that more direct communication with residents would be helpful, and that residents could be involved more in running services. The Leader said that he did not want to overburden residents by asking them to do work which the council ought to be doing. He also did not want to return to sending out large amounts of Council publicity as this was a waste of money which could be spent on services. The Council did have various e-Newsletters which residents could sign up to.

Councillor Phibbs said that he didn't want to rerun the debate about whether the stock transfer had been a good idea, although he said that the proposal would have required estate redevelopment to be financially sustainable. He said that he felt much public money had been wasted on the transfer initiative, noting that officer time had not been accounted for in the report. He felt that there should have been greater scrutiny of the programme, noting that when the Residents Commission had presented its report to the PAC the report had not been circulated before the meeting. He felt that the programme should have been stopped earlier and said that it seemed unlikely that residents would have voted for the proposal.

Councillor Connell said Councillors could have requested further items on the Stock Transfer Programme had they wanted to scrutinise spending on it further; he noted however that opposition attendance at PAC meetings had, in his view, been poor.

A resident asked what the Leader of the Council's view on estate regeneration was. The Leader explained that he generally supported estate regeneration, but that it needed to be supported and controlled by residents, rather than dictated to them.

43. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING AND WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Phibbs said that he had requested an item on the use of Interim Management Orders, which allowed the council to take over properties for a

period of time; he suggested that these properties could then be used as temporary accommodation. Councillor Homan suggested that a report on Temporary Accommodation Procurement could be brought to the PAC, including a response to Councillor Phibbs' suggestion.

Councillor Phibbs said that he had also asked for an item on the removal of satellite dishes. Councillor De'Ath explained that he felt that this issue would be better dealt with as a member's enquiry rather than requiring a PAC report, as it was a relatively small problem.

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 9.20 pm

Chair

Contact officer: Ainsley Gilbert
Committee Co-ordinator
Governance and Scrutiny
☎: 020 8753 2088
E-mail: ainsley.gilbert@lbhf.gov.uk