

BRIXTON

Neighbourhood Forum

Notes of Meeting on 12th June 2012

Held at the Brixton Community Base, Talma Road, SW2

Present:

Devon Thomas (Chair)
Cllr. Lib Peck, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, LBL
Sue Foster, Executive Director, Housing, Planning, Regeneration, LBL;
Alyson Young, Director, Planning, Regeneration, Enterprise, LBL;
Jean Kerrigan (FoWG/ Brixton Housing Forum)
Alan Piper (notes, Brixton Society) R. Eligon (LBL)
Giles Gibson (Herne Hill Forum) Charlotte Evans (LBL)
Steve Griffin (Stockwell Partnership) Genstacia Bull (LBL)
Mamading Ceesay (London Creative Labs) Sarah Coyte (LBL)
Juneary Raymond (Lambeth Enterprise) Chris Norris (LBL)
Maria Thacker (Lambeth Enterprise) C. Carpenter (LBL)
Jim Clancey (Lambeth Play Association) Thomas Wood (resident)
Dinah Roake (Brixton Green) Maggie Owolade (resident)
Brad Carroll (Brixton Green) Sonia Winifred (resident)
Robin Matthews (Brixton Green) Ron Hollis (LTC)
Philippe Castaing (Brixton Green) Paul Hill (BCT)
Barbara Pattinson (SE5 Forum) Lee Alley (Streatham Action)
David Warner (Brixton Society) Bill Linskey (Brixton Society)
Nic Weedon (FoWG, Treasurer) Phil Isaac (Brixton Society)
Michael Ball (Waterloo CDG) Sue Bell (TTB)
Ted Inman (South Bank Employers Group) Richard Bridge (WaCoCo)
Matthew Clarke (Carlton Mansions HC)
Tim Gaymer (Loughborough Junction Action Group)
Ron - (Chair, Lambeth Tenants Council)
Sybille Mansour (Community Draught Busters)
Caroline Funnell (Brixton Community Base)

Apologies for absence received from:

John Spicer (Membership Sec.), Dellmay (Brixton Art Gallery),
Anthea Masey (Loughborough Junction Action Group)

Introduction:

Devon Thomas opened the meeting at 6-10 pm.
In view of the wider interest in Neighbourhood Planning issues, this meeting had also been opened to representatives of other forums around Lambeth. The Forum had been exploring the implications of the recent Localism Bill, and as a follow-up to the presentation by the Prince's Foundation in April, this meeting had been convened to hear how Lambeth Council proposed to deal with the issues.

Councillor Lib Peck:

Acknowledging the presence of members from various forums, Cllr. Peck began with a borough-wide overview. She had been Cabinet member for Regeneration & Planning in 2008-11, so issues such as the Brixton MasterPlan were familiar. Sustainability and local character emerged as important elements from this.

The Council was presently working towards the “Co-operative Council” approach and saw the need for greater use of neighbourhood forums and community engagement. The Planning service was admitted to be weak on these matters in the past.

Neighbourhood Plans were seen as one of the tools available, and the Council was trying to respond so that work could go forward. The process set out in legislation is fairly prescriptive, and the Council needs to ensure any local plan is aligned with other plans and processes affecting the borough. She was anxious to identify what practical support the Council should offer. Due to limited resources, it would be helpful if forums could work with the Council to establish criteria and identify the support needed.

David Warner (BS): Conservation Areas seemed to be ineffective - to what extent are they still considered as part of the Planning tool-kit?

Tim Gaymer (LJAG): It was important to identify what to conserve, and why, but a Neighbourhood Plan should also embrace wider community issues. A MasterPlan is ineffective without the teeth to enforce it.

Bill Linskey (BS): Community input on Planning issues was more difficult now – there is less scope for community members to speak at Planning Committee meetings. Written objections were not adequately reported to the Committee. What consultation will there be on the Brixton Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) now being prepared by consultants?

Paul Hill (BCT): What is the role of the Planning service in supporting the community, or wider Council policies?

Cllr. Peck responded with these points:

Residents’ concerns should have been picked up long before the Planning Committee decision stage (though not stated how).

MasterPlans needed to be followed up with (for example) SPDs which had some teeth to control planning applications. There will be a further round of consultation on the Brixton SPD in the Autumn.

It was beyond the Council’s resources to produce a Neighbourhood Plan for all areas wanting them, hence the invitation for input on how to approach this.

Sue Foster (Executive Director):

Conservation Areas are certainly still a Planning tool, to safeguard the character of areas under pressure from development proposals. They can control demolition and ensure that planning applications conform to the original character. A regular review process is valuable.

Alyson Young (Divisional Director):

Neighbourhood Plans are easier to apply to small towns than to a wider urban context. It will be a learning process for all concerned, so the local authority will need to discuss with the local community what is the best way forward. A Neighbourhood Plan has the advantage of raising an area's profile and encouraging interest.

Sue Foster (Executive Director):

The Council has limited resources, but aims to offer some basic support in considering the feasibility of a Neighbourhood Plan. It could support a first wave of 3 or 4 plans with expenditure of c.£20,000 per plan.

There may be scope to bring in other agencies or support to supplement this.

Mamading Ceesay (LCL): The various planning policies at National, London, borough and local levels could be thought of as nesting Russian Dolls, one encasing another.

Barbara Pattinson (SE5): Cross-borough working is another complication. 20% of the SE5 Forum area is within Lambeth, the rest in Southwark.

Cllr. Peck acknowledged the need to work on cross-border co-operation.

Ted Inman (SBEG): A business-led plan was in view for the South Bank area, where they were expecting to do more of the work themselves, with less call on Council resources. A Neighbourhood Plan would probably have more teeth than a SPD.

Giles Gibson (HHF): There could be a big investment by the community in drawing up plans, so he wanted to be assured that a Neighbourhood Plan would be fully embedded in Council planning processes and management. There had been no response from either Lambeth or Southwark to previous work by the Herne Hill Forum.

Alyson Young responded that there are statutory processes for a Neighbourhood Plan, which meant its policies took effect once the independent examination was completed.

Giles added that the Council itself would also need to believe in the Plan.

Michael Ball (Waterloo CDG): Neighbourhood Plans needed to be more positive than just adding extra planning controls.

In the Waterloo area, the local community had had some success with local regeneration projects, but they took a lot of time and effort to achieve. The local community represented a considerable resource to gather information and contribute local knowledge. They would like more input into Conservation Areas.

Alyson Young conceded that there was potential for local input to improve the Enforcement process of planning restrictions.

In response to a question about what could be done if there was no Neighbourhood Plan, Alyson replied that there were still a number of tools, depending on the local issues. In any case, it could easily take 2 years for a Neighbourhood Plan to be adopted, so there may be other measures that could be applied in the meantime.

Sue Foster added that the Council could engage more fully on existing plans, such as Lambeth's Core Strategy. It was important to remember that a Neighbourhood Plan could not be in conflict with an existing Statutory Plan.

Dinah Roake (Brixton Green): A lot of advice has been published on developing plans at a neighbourhood level. The new approach should be for the community to lead and the local authority to assist. A full Neighbourhood Plan would have more weight than a SPD.

Jean Kerrigan (FoWG): The purpose in establishing the Brixton Forum was to empower the local community to take charge, rather than allow developers to promote their own plans.

Nic Weedon (BS/ FoWG): The case of the Railway Hotel was an example of the Council changing its view and failing to support a community-based proposal.

Juneary Raymond (Lambeth Enterprise): She was sceptical about the Council embarking on its SPD at this stage – how far had it progressed and how well would it fit in with the new planning legislation?

Sonia Winifred: The community felt sidelined, because there had been little engagement so far. Any plan should reflect social issues, such as the need for local jobs.

Matthew Clarke: At present there are lots of rumours about the MasterPlan and proposals for various sites. Clear information is needed.

Bill Linskey (Brixton Society): The weakness lies not in the form of the plan, but in the extent to which it is followed. At present there is no effective enforcement of existing policies, so developers may disregard it. The Council's own Planning Committee failed to follow the existing plan in respect of the Ice Rink proposal, and the Council might weaken again if the (S.106) bribe was big enough. We need to be confident that any plan that is adopted will be enforced.

Lee Alley (Streatham Action Group): Streatham also has a MasterPlan but again it seems to have been filed away and ignored by planners and developers. Streatham Action have consulted with residents, businesses and safe neighbourhood panels, and now want to see the plan put into effect locally.

David Warner (Brixton Society) drew attention to the current TV series highlighting long-term changes in selected London streets, such as Deptford High Street, where redevelopment took place against residents' wishes. A similar pattern is being repeated on the Guinness Trust Estate, Loughborough Park. The Council just follows the money – S.106 corrupts the planning process.

Cllr. Lib Peck acknowledged the widespread scepticism within the community. The Council is committed to working more closely with the community. It aims to sound out community groups on the issues and criteria involved in a Neighbourhood Planning approach.

Some preliminary workshops are being held on the Brixton SPD, prior to the formal consultation process. Alyson added that there would be exhibitions and discussions, and efforts to contact newer communities too.

Devon thanked Council representatives for attending. Local communities have had bad experiences with past redevelopment proposals, but now we wanted to see positive things happen.

Further Discussion:

Discussion among community representatives resumed after a short break, key points as follows:

Paul Hill (BCT) suggested that members send in ideas for specific sites or policies to the Forum.

Nic Weedon: While giving the Council the benefit of the doubt, preparing our own plan would involve a lot of work, with only limited resources available from the Council. We need to improve co-ordination between interested groups, to avoid duplication of effort.

Michael Ball (WCDG): The Council's approach has developed over the past 10-12 years, and at Vauxhall they made a concerted effort to resist a big tower block proposal. Sue Foster seemed likely to be an effective Director, now encompassing Housing, Planning and Regeneration. We should take the opportunity to get involved while it is there.

Giles Gibson (HHF): The Co-operative Council concept has not yet percolated down into the way the Council bureaucracy operates. We need to ensure that implementation of any plan gets embedded in Council working, across all departments. There is also the problem of getting enough resources for a community-based approach. We will need both professional expertise and community development skills, otherwise the burden falls on a few individuals. The Herne Hill Forum would put their draft proposals on a Wiki site, so anyone could contribute ideas to it, but recognised the need for live events and outreach activities to reach a wider cross-section of the community.

Dinah Roake (Brixton Green): For Brixton, the MasterPlan provides a starting point which could save time with research and plan preparation. If we opted to pursue a Neighbourhood Plan, current work on the SPD could also be useful.

Streatham Action were less happy with their MasterPlan, but had carried out further consultations which provided a basis for revision.

Ron (Tenants' Council): Nothing is certain, but agreed that we need to use the opportunity while it is there. There are some committed people at the top right now, and newer staff coming in were keener too. If the Council was prepared to support 4 plans at £20k each, that totalled £80k of resources available.

Jean Kerrigan: A recent Council Housing consultation got 6,500 responses through various channels, and tenants came up with responsible suggestions. Once community support is established, the Council is open to challenge if it fails to deliver.

Alan Piper (Brixton Society) recalled that communities had come together in the past and successfully resisted or modified Council redevelopment plans. The value of a plan (whatever its title) is that it can help provide a balanced mix of uses within a neighbourhood, otherwise market forces mean that one use tends to dominate – offices in the past, privately-built flats at present. We need to be particularly vigilant about protecting sites for employment uses within and around the Town Centre.

The Council is soon to consult on its Community Infrastructure Levy, which will largely replace S.106 by a fixed scale of contributions from various types of development, which could be a more transparent approach.

Next Steps:

Devon asked for names of volunteers for a working party to pursue Neighbourhood Plans across the Forum Network.

He hoped it would be possible to hold a follow-up meeting in July, subject to availability of key people.

Other Matters Raised:

Windrush Square:

There was concern that the Ritzy had taken over use of part of Windrush Square by placing tables under the old plane tree. Bill Linskey reported that the Brixton Society had enquired about this and found that an officer in the Parks Dept. had granted the Ritzy a cafe licence for 3 years, but there had been no prior consultation.

In the past there had been restrictions on drinking in the Square, but no alcohol licence appeared to have been applied for. Michael Ball pointed out that use for more than 28(?) days a year would require planning permission. Giles suggested that the community should take over management of the space. Devon noted that the Business Forum had previously suggested some market activity within the Square.

Council Tenancy Changes:

One of the other provisions of the recent Localism Act is the introduction of “Flexible Tenancies” for short terms of a maximum of 5 years. Council officers have drafted a policy for the housing associations (RSLs) that it is working with.

The Tenants’ Council consider this is badly drafted and the thin end of the wedge, undermining social housing and leading to a more transient population, frequently moving from one tenancy to another and weakening social cohesion. Mamading pointed out that this would repeat the recent problems on the Guinness Trust Estate across many more estates around the borough.

Members were urged to respond before the proposal goes to the Council’s Cabinet on 16th July.

Meeting closed at 8-35 pm.

Notes prepared by Alan Piper, with additional material from Matthew Clarke.

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