

# Scrutiny Report



19 December 2019

## SITE VISITS TO REGENERATION ESTATES

Name of Scrutiny Committee	Regeneration Scrutiny Committee
Report sponsor	<b>Councillor Carole Baume</b> Chair, Regeneration Scrutiny Committee
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Exempt / confidential / not for publication	<b>No</b>
Council Plan reference	<b>3.4</b> - Build 500 more new council homes by 2022 <b>3.8</b> - Ensure the £165m council home refurbishment programme is delivered efficiently and to a high standard
Wards affected	<b>Bletchley East and Stony Stratford</b>

### 1. Executive Summary

During October 2019 members of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee carried out site visits to Fullers Slade (4 October 2019) and to Serpentine Court and the Lakes Estate (24 October 2019) where they viewed the estates for themselves and discussed the regeneration proposals for each area with residents. The Committee's Overview and Scrutiny Officer attended both site visits in order to make notes which form the basis of this report.

The issues highlighted in this report are taken directly from the comments made to members of the Committee by residents during the site visits and are not the views of the report sponsor or author. Some points may appear contradictory as they reflect the views of a range of residents, some of whom had very differing opinions from their neighbours.

## **2. Recommendation**

The Committee is asked to scrutinise the site visit reports which are attached as Annex A and Annex B and comment on any lessons learned so far which they think should be taken into account by the Council when planning future regeneration projects.

## **3. Questions for the Committee to Address**

During consideration of this item there are a number of questions the Committee may wish to address:

- What are the lessons learned so far from the current regeneration projects?
- How does the Council manage the fears and expectations of affected residents once a new regeneration project is announced?
- What needs to be in place before any new regeneration project starts? Eg Community Partnership Officer in post, suitable neutral venue as a hub for meetings and displays of proposals/plans, support of local ward councillors and parish council?
- Is there merit in employing just one, tried and tested independent advisory service for all the Council's future regeneration projects?
- What are the non-housing aspects of regeneration that need to be built in from the start, rather than as "nice to have" extras?
- What other support services for residents are needed?

### **List of Annexes**

Annex A – Report on the Site Visit to Fullers Slade – 4 October 2019

Annex B – Report on the Site Visit to Serpentine Court and the Lakes Estate – 24 October 2019

## **Annex A**

### **Report on the Site Visit to Fullers Slade – 4 October 2019**

Members of the Committee in attendance: Councillors Baume, Rankine and Walker

During the visit the group met a range of residents including council tenants, housing association tenants, private rental sector tenants and home owners. The walkabout was led by members of the Fullers Slade Residents' Steering Group and the Chair of the Fullers Slade Residents' Association.

These are the comments / observations made to the group during its walkabout. Some of the statements below may appear contradictory, but that is because they represent the views of a range of residents, some of whom had very differing opinions from their neighbours.

- The Rowans Family Centre was a Children's Centre, rather than a full community centre, which made it very difficult for other groups to use. It did not function as a real community hub as it could not be used for the social activities that brought communities together eg bingo nights, quiz nights, parties – private or community based.
- Residents thought that the regeneration process had taken too long; after 2.5 years people still did not know or understand what was happening.
- There was a view that the process should have been Council led rather than resident led, with the Council just telling tenants what it was going to do and then getting on with it.
- There appeared to be a deep distrust of the Council and how it worked, including concerns about how much council rents would rise for either refurbished or new build properties. Lack of leadership on housing matters at the Council was seen as a major issue.
- Residents also had a deep lack of trust in senior housing staff at the Council to deliver, not just regeneration, but day to day repairs and maintenance as well.
- However, there was lots of praise for Debbie Murray, the local Community Partnership Officer and all the hard work she did working with the various groups on the estate.
- The tree root damage to pavements, driveways, gardens and properties was quite severe in some areas. Residents were unsure as to who was responsible for the maintenance of gardens / driveways etc? Tenants had been told by the Council that they were responsible but council tenants thought it should be the Council as they (the tenants) had not planted the trees.
- No-one was clear as to who was responsible for maintenance (pruning, lopping etc) of the trees, particularly those outside property boundaries either.

- Housing Association (HA) tenants reported that the HAs were not interested in the regeneration proposals and that they would not talk to the Council until the Council told them which proposal had been accepted.
- Residents expressed concern for what appeared to be the relevant Cabinet Member's lack of impartiality and his apparent favouring of one particular option over the others.
- Private tenants and home owners felt left out of the loop in discussions about the future of Fullers Slade.
- Initially, private tenants had been told that once the regeneration was complete they would have the option to rent a new property from YourMK. Many were disappointed that this, or a similar option, was no longer available.
- Private tenants had been advised that if their property was no longer available / affordable after the regeneration was complete, they would have to apply to the Council's homelessness service for assistance with housing.
- Private sector rents had risen since the regeneration programme was first announced.
- The lack of the promised porta-cabin as a community hub / venue for meetings about the regeneration programme was causing frustration for all groups as the Rowans Centre, which was currently being used, was not ideal for this type of activity;
- Residents do want something to happen to improve the area and want to be part of it.
- What little information was being supplied to residents kept changing, so people had no idea what the real position was.
- Several residents said they were not bothering to register to vote as it would not make any difference as their views would not be listened to.
- Some of those in favour of a ballot were not happy with the decision being based on a simple majority of those who voted. They would have preferred to have seen a minimum threshold before the decision was binding.
- There was no definite information as to what would happen if there was no clear majority.
- The view of tenants was that YourMK had been horrendous as an organisation which looked after housing stock. It just seemed to be carrying out an intelligence gathering exercise which tenants thought was a very surreal process.
- Members of the Fullers Slade Residents' Steering Group (RSG) had visited the Dollis Valley regeneration programme in London (LB Barnet) which they cited as an example of good regeneration. Having seen the results there, the RSG had been hoping for something similar for Fullers Slade.

- Whilst acknowledging the need for more / better housing, residents had fears about too much new building on open, green spaces on the estate which residents really appreciated and which they saw as one of the area's positive features.
- One local homeowner said he did not want the Council doing any refurbishment on his property. If and when anything needed doing, he would arrange to have it done himself. He saw it as unwarranted interference in his life by the Council.
- He also reported that house prices had been static since the regeneration programme was announced. The homeowner's plans to sell and move on had been on hold for nearly three years now as no-one wanted to buy in the area due to uncertainty as to what the plans were.
- Members of the Committee taking part in the visit received lots of queries as to when the pre-vote information packs would be distributed and how much detailed information would be in them. It was generally the first question asked by all those to whom the group spoke.
- This was followed by the question as to whether there would be a list of the properties scheduled for demolition in the pack?
- Kerbs on the estate were not disabled friendly; there were very few drop kerbs which allowed those in wheelchairs / disabled scooters / parents with child buggies etc to get down from pavements when they needed to cross the road. Pavements, which were generally tarmacked paths, rather than surfaced with paving slabs, were very uneven, with myriad patched repairs making them unsafe for those using sticks / visually impaired etc (eg concealed tree stump in the middle of one pavement – difficult to miss if you don't know it's there, particularly in the dark).
- There was also no dropped kerb access to driveways / car ports with the persistent bumping over the high kerbs causing damage to vehicles.
- Residents reported that crime was not a big issue on the estate; it was mainly low-level anti-social behaviour and there were very few burglaries or thefts.

## **Annex B**

### **Report on the Site Visit to Serpentine Court and the Lakes Estate – 24 October 2019**

Members of the Committee in attendance: Councillors Baume, Petchey, Rankine and Walker

The walkabout was led by members of the Serpentine Court Residents Steering Group, the Community Participation Officer and Ward Councillor, Emily Darlington. Representatives for the Council's repair and maintenance contractors, Mears, and the Council's Housing Asset Manager also took part.

The visit started at the weekly coffee morning held at the Spotlight Centre in Serpentine Court. This is a vibrant event giving residents the chance to meet each other, the Lakes Estate Community Partnership Officer, representatives from Mears to discuss repairs and maintenance of their properties and with Councillor Darlington, local Ward Councillor, to discuss any other matters of concern.

There were a number of display boards around the room presenting the information from the "Lakes from Above – Full Redevelopment for Serpentine Court" event held during the summer and the more recent "The Lakes - New Homes and Neighbourhoods" event.

As this was a large group which kept splitting into smaller groups with different combinations of people, not every item discussed will have been recorded. However, these are the main points which emerged during the visit:

#### **Outside**

- Sufficient new houses would be built for the residents of Serpentine Court before demolition starts. This meant that for most residents they should only have to move once – out of Serpentine Court into their new, permanent properties. Building the new properties was currently scheduled to start towards the end of 2020.
- The size of the properties would be at least the same size as those vacated in Serpentine Court and in some instances may be bigger.
- All residents on the Lakes Estate were being consulted about the "Lakes New Homes and Neighbourhoods" plans.
- The Lakes Improvement Fund would cover the uplift of areas of the estate not in need of major regeneration.
- Some new development was planned for the Windermere Drive end of the park known as The Warren. Loss of this area as a public amenity would be compensated for by the opening up of parts of the park which had been cut off from practical use by the overgrowing of hedges and trees in recent years.

- A new biodiversity programme was planned for the estate with a SUDS (sustainable urban draining system) pond in The Warren, together with 4 wildlife corridors which would run through the estate.
- Measures will be needed to ensure that the pond is a safe area for children and for the prevention of anti-social behaviour in the park.
- The Park would still have plenty of space for community events and residents would also like to see something permanent to entertain young people such as an area for skateboarding, BMX cycle course.
- The open area along Stoke Road had been identified for house building in the local Neighbourhood Plan. The new properties would face onto Stoke Road and will be one of the new developments into which the residents of Serpentine Court will move.
- The development would include new crossing points and a speed limit reduction on Stoke Road to facilitate access to the canal and The Parks Trust linear park beyond it.
- Drayton Road would also have new crossing points and a reduced speed limit.
- The parking provision for the new development met the Council's standard requirements on parking provision for new developments.
- A major parking survey had been undertaken and the assessment was that the current garages on the Lakes Estate were too small to use for modern cars and would be demolished.
- Council garages in Milton Keynes were not attached to specific properties; they were rented out separately and were often located away from residential properties, giving rise to anti-social behaviour.
- Arrangements were being made for a regular "Lakes Regeneration" slot on the local radio station "Secklow Sounds" as a further strand in the engagement with residents process.
- The local bakery at Serpentine Court was one of the best used shops on the estate and would soon be moving to new, improved premises.
- The Water Eaton Church Centre was also opening a drop-in centre and community café on the estate.
- There were large cracks in the fabric of Serpentine Court, with some parts being supported by permanent scaffolding which attracted anti-social behaviour such as climbing the scaffolding. Mears were trying all possible measures to prevent this as they would be responsible if anyone was hurt.
- Residents reported that communal security doors were often propped open which was against health and safety regulations. Mears promised to remind their staff and contractors that the doors should not be left open.

## **Serpentine Court**

- Residents reported that the lift, stairwells and communal areas were usually in a disgusting state due to anti-social behaviour – eg urine, vomit, broken glass.
- There was only one small lift, which was often out of order and its condition was seriously unpleasant, particularly for the elderly or parents with young children.
- There were no rubbish chutes in Serpentine Court so black sacks were often just thrown over balconies, creating a mess below.
- Even though some doors and windows in the flats had been replaced many properties were still damp and living conditions unsatisfactory.
- Much of the water ingress into the flats was through cracks in the balconies and other cavities, often seeping from the top down as maintenance of the balconies was now very poor, allowing water to pass down the building ; cavity trays were not working and the original drainage off the balconies was often blocked.
- It would be 2-3 years before everyone could be moved out of Serpentine Court so the Council still needed to maintain the flats properly until then, ensuring they were safe, warm and dry.
- One resident had had the windows and one of the doors in her living room replaced but not the other door and not the windows in her bedroom, which remained damp. She had to keep the bedroom windows open at all times to minimise the condensation and clothes stored in the bedroom were permanently damp.
- Another resident, in a ground floor property, reported that she had had a major problem with damp in her kitchen since August 2018 due to water seeping down from the upper storeys. She had been backwards and forwards to Mears to try and get it sorted but without success. Thermo-imaging had confirmed that the problem was falling damp, which had been going on for so long she now had problems with silverfish and cockroaches. Some of her kitchen appliances (fridge and freezer) were currently located in her living room, to allow contractor access to the affected area, which was very inconvenient.
- Responsibility for pest control was a hot topic; Mears had a small budget, which was already spent for 2019/20, for vermin control in communal areas. They would do pest control work but would charge extra for it.
- The Group were advised that the Cabinet Member for Housing and Regeneration and the Director of Housing and Regeneration were working on a policy to deal with vermin effectively.

## **Other Points**

- Both local primary schools hoped to expand through the provision of S106 money from the new developments.



- The regular Thursday surgery with Mears was proving to be a huge asset to residents. Although not yet officially advertised, it was always very busy and was open to all council tenants on the Lakes Estate, not just those in Serpentine Court.
- Officers from the Council's Housing Service also regularly attended the Thursday coffee morning so that residents could raise issues with them.
- A welfare advice surgery took place on a Monday afternoon at the Spotlight centre.
- Planning permission for the new builds was likely to be applied for in February 2020; it had been delayed slightly because of the proposal to include a new energy centre in the plans which, it was hoped, would reduce residents' energy bills by up to 60%. It was cutting edge technology and would be part of Phase B.
- However, despite this slight delay, work on the new houses should still be able to start at end of 2020.
- The houses in the Phase A development would have air source heat pumps installed.
- The housing needs assessment and matching process for individual residents had been done before the ballot had taken place.
- The Community Partnership Officer (CPO) was a constant communication conduit between the residents and the Council and had been key to the success of the process so far at Serpentine Court/Lakes Estate; residents agreed that every regeneration area need an "Anne".
- The key was understanding the local community and being able to build links between the different groups.
- Having a 'neutral' hub like the Spotlight Centre for meetings was also vital.
- Members of the Serpentine Court Residents' Steering Group (RSG) would like to see the word "regeneration" replaced with something more positive as many residents found the term too scary. Residents were living their lives day to day and for many the 'future' was too far away to contemplate.
- Members of the Committee present agreed that homes needed to be maintained to a much better standard than currently until such time as demolition happened.
- Due to the borough-wide pressures on council houses there was a lot of over-crowding locally.
- The independent advisers from TPAS had provided excellent support to the RSG.
- Residents had had a chance to meet TPAS, PPCI and one other organisation and discuss their needs with them before making a final decision. TPAS had stood out as the most suitable to everyone involved.

- The Serpentine Court RSG were of the view that the service the Fullers Slade residents had received from their independent advisers had not been as good as the service they received from TPAS and, in their view, was contributory to the delays and misunderstanding of the process on that estate.
- The question for Regeneration Scrutiny Committee to consider was “what kind of resources will future regeneration estates need?”
- A case for contracting one independent adviser to work across the whole of the borough should be investigated as plans needed to be in place for the next tranche of regeneration projects.
- The non-housing aspects of regeneration needed to be given a higher profile – what other support services were needed?
- Residents agreed that anything done now would fail again in 10-15 years’ time if it was not done properly.
- Ideally, Councillor Darlington would like to see local trades people (plumbers, carpenters, bricklayers etc) employed on the new developments on the estate.
- A decent youth offer also needed to part of the regeneration deal.
- The volunteers involved in the RSG and its campaigns had developed in personal confidence and the Community Participation Officer would like to see the Council reward residents for their efforts in engagement. She would like residents to take on her role (and be remunerated for it) by becoming local Community Champions.
- Local residents had been attending personal development courses which they very much enjoyed and wished they could do more but there was very little money for this. Personal development needed to be planned as part of the regeneration process, not delivered on an ad hoc basis.
- The Neighbourhood Employment Partnership needed to be a recognised part of the community in order to get people to sign up and be successful.
- The Lakes Estate as a whole was lacking a number of facilities that helped support a thriving and sustainable community, including:
  - a library;
  - a post office;
  - a children’s centre;
  - a free cashpoint machine.

Councillor Baume then thanked everyone for their help with the site visit, for showing the group round and their honesty about the problems locally.