

Minutes of the meeting of the REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on WEDNESDAY 30 OCTOBER 2019 at 7.00 PM

Present: Councillor Trendall (Acting Chair)
Councillors Baines, Cryer-Whitehead, Exon, Minns (substituting for Petchey) and Rankine

Officers: M Kelleher (Director, Housing & Regeneration) and E Richardson (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Also present: 6 members of the public

Apologies: Councillors Baume, Petchey (Minns substituting) Walker and Wilson

RG11 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Baines advised that he was a Milton Keynes Council tenant.

Councillor Cryer-Whitehead advised that she was a Milton Keynes Council tenant on Fullers Slade.

RG12 MINUTES

RESOLVED –

1. That once Councillor Cryer-Whitehead's declaration as a tenant of Milton Keynes Council was added, the Minutes of the Committee's meeting held on 11 July 2019 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.
2. That the ruling of the Head of Legal Services in relation to Minute RG08 (Resolution 3(e)) on full Council not being able to sign off the revised Regeneration Strategy as it was not part of the Council's Policy Framework, made at the Regeneration Cabinet Sub-Committee held on 25 July 2019, be noted.

RG13 NEW DRAFT REGENERATION STRATEGY

The Committee reviewed and discussed the headline items in the "We will" and "Principles" sections set out in the Regeneration Strategy document which was currently out for public consultation with both the Director of Housing and Regeneration and members of the public who were present.

The Committee heard from the Director of Housing and Regeneration who explained that all the responses received during the consultation period would be looked at and turned into a strategy which would be taken to Cabinet in December. He also confirmed that the recommendations for a new Regeneration Strategy made by the Committee at its meeting on 11 July would be taken into consideration once the drafting of the new strategy began.

The Committee welcomed the assurances of the Director of Housing and Regeneration that the Council was committed to the principles set out in the consultation document and that it would take on board the recommendations from the previous meeting and any new ones from this meeting. He hoped that if this did not happen any omissions would be brought to his attention.

Some members of the Committee said that they would have liked to have seen more substance in the consultation document, rather than just headline items although the Acting Chair expressed a view that he thought there was enough information in the document for people to be able to participate in the consultation.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Committee welcomes the Council's commitment to developing a revised and improved Regeneration Strategy.
2. That when drafting the revised strategy, the recommendations (other than 3(e)) made by the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 11 July 2019 be taken into consideration.

RG14

FULLERS SLADE REGENERATION BALLOT

Scrutiny of this item began with Councillor Rankine wondering where the widespread fear of wholesale demolition of properties on Fullers Slade had originated from as the final decision as to what happened would be decided by a democratic vote.

Bianca Bendig-Ceesay, Chair of the Fullers Slade Residents' Association, explained that despite already having 3 drop-in sessions on the regeneration proposals, residents still did not know which homes would be demolished if Option 3 was preferred. It was bringing fear to the estate and she thought residents should be informed of which properties would be affected before the ballot took place.

The Director of Housing and Regeneration advised that the original information which had been sent to residents had already been revised and that the updates should be despatched by 4 November.

He disagreed with the Chair of the Fullers Slade Residents' Association that the Council was not giving residents sufficient information and in a timely manner. He was of the view that residents would be supplied with ample information on which to make a decision and that his staff were ready to offer assistance to any residents who had difficulty in understanding the plans or the other information provided.

The Committee also received complaints from residents that they thought information was being delayed, the website was not being updated regularly and that some form of version control needed to be put in place so that residents knew that what they were reading was the most up to date version of any document. The Acting Chair of the Committee suggested that perhaps a summary sheet listing the changes could be included with any updates.

The Director of Housing and Regeneration agreed that some form of version control was a good idea and that he would arrange for this to happen. In response to a question from Councillor Baines, he confirmed that a cut-off date of two weeks prior to the ballot for the distribution of up to date information had been agreed by the Regeneration Cabinet Sub-Committee on 12 September.

Councillor Baines agreed that the information sent to residents needed to be right in order to prevent any legal challenges to the eventual decision and to ensure improvements were made to the process before any further regeneration projects were progressed.

The Chair of the Fullers Slade Residents' Association then raised with the Committee that not all residents who had registered to vote in the regeneration ballot had received confirmation that they were registered. The Director of Housing and Regeneration said that he had already been approached by some residents who had not yet received their confirmations, which he forwarded to officer colleagues in the Elections Team for action. The Elections Team were checking their records and any confirmations not yet received would be resent. He urged any residents who had not yet received the confirmation they were expecting to get in touch with either himself or the Elections Team as soon as possible so that the matter could be sorted out.

The Director of Housing and Regeneration confirmed to residents that the long awaited porta-cabin which had been promised as a hub and focal point for regeneration activities would be put in place during the week commencing 4 November 2019.

Councillor Rankine reported back to the Committee on the site visit to the Fullers Slade estate made by some members of the Committee earlier in the month. He said that when speaking to residents, a lot of the feedback was on the lack of information about the proposals. He added that, having read the information pack which had now been sent out to residents, he thought that there were still questions which hadn't been answered. There was no information on what the costs would be or how much it would cost lease or freeholders to opt into the programme. He would also have liked to have seen more tables of data associated with each option. Councillor Rankine added that he was disappointed that the Committee had not been advised of how, or the number of lease or freeholders who would be affected by the various options.

Councillor Rankine also expressed concern that the final decision would be by a straight forward majority rather than a minimum threshold of a percentage of those voting as there was the potential for a decision which would have an impact on all residents being decided by just a few. He also suggested that the only sure way of ensuring all the postal votes were returned was by the Council going and collecting them.

The Director of Housing and Regeneration responded by saying that information about the costs of the different options would be in the additional information which was being sent out the following week. This would include the cost to private owners and what help and assistance would be available to them.

David Lee, the Secretary of RoRE (Residents of Regeneration Estates), advised the Committee that he had attended one of the drop in events and had been personally impressed by the level of knowledge of those who were running the event.

Mr Lee went on to explain that his concerns were about what happened after the ballot as there was the potential for a serious social split between residents so everyone needed to work together to maintain a cohesive community. The Committee agreed that this was an important issue and that just as much community engagement work would need to be done after the ballot as before it.

The Committee reviewed the Fullers Slade Residents' Charter which had been approved by Cabinet on 1 October. The only comment from the Committee was that the last sentence did not make sense in the current context. The Director of Housing and Regeneration agreed to check this.

The Chair of the Fullers Slade Residents' Association commented on the readability of the documents, particularly the inconsistent way in which numbers were presented. She said that for people who did not read well, for whatever reason, presenting numbers as digits, rather than spelling them out as words, made documents much easier to understand. The documents would also have benefited from more detailed proof reading as there was a web-link missing from the covering letter as published in the agenda pack. The Director of Housing and Regeneration said that he was sure that the letter as sent out would have the correct information in it. On being advised that the letter displayed on the Council's Regeneration web pages was also missing the link, he agreed to check this and have it corrected.

In response to a query from the Committee, the Director of Housing and Regeneration advised that it had been a Cabinet member-officer decision to remove Option 4 (total demolition) from the ballot following a workshop on the options which had been attended by representatives of the Fullers Slade Residents' Steering Group. Once analysed in depth it had been agreed that Option 4 was not deliverable and had therefore been dropped.

The Chair of the Fullers Slade Residents' Association advised the Committee that there had been some nasty exchanges on Facebook about the Fullers Slade regeneration programme, with some residents either being removed for disagreeing or being trolled. She said that residents were finding this very distressing and the situation was getting out of hand. Although the Committee was concerned at this behaviour and reiterated the point that all parties involved needed to work together to achieve the best outcomes for local residents, activity on non-council Facebook pages was outside its remit.

However, the Committee was of the view that lessons needed to be learnt from all stages of the process so that mistakes were not repeated when the next tranche of regeneration projects was rolled out. The Director of Housing and Regeneration added that imposing a residents' steering group was not necessarily the right approach for all areas. The Council needed to talk to local people and involve them in developing the plans for their area from the start.

RESOLVED –

1. That a version control mechanism be put in place for any updates to the information supplied to residents of Fullers Slade prior to the ballot so that they can be assured that the information they are looking at is the most up to date version.

2. That a version control mechanism is also applied to any updates posted on the Council's Regeneration web pages and that these are kept up to date in a timely manner.
3. That residents' comments on the readability and presentation of the information sent to them, such as using digits for all numbers rather than spelling them out as words, proof reading etc, be noted for any future regeneration projects.

RG15

DELIVERY PHASE OF SERPENTINE COURT REGENERATION PROJECT

The Committee heard evidence from Jeanette Marling, Chair of the Lakes Estate Residents' Association, about residents' concerns over rumours that the date for submitting the planning application for the new development had been changed. She said no-one from the Council had spoken to the Residents' Association about any changes but local residents could not believe that the Association was not being kept up to date, particularly as the Cabinet Regeneration Sub-Committee kept saying that they should be consulted with. Ms Marling went on to say that the Residents' Association was never mentioned in any positive news, such as its involvement in the weekly coffee morning. The impression was that the Serpentine Court Residents' Steering Group was the only residents' group on the estate. She added that the community facilities were for all residents of the Lakes Estate. The current situation was dividing the community and creating bad feeling.

The Committee reiterated its view made earlier, that all groups in an area needed to work together to achieve the best outcomes for local residents and that the Council needed to be aware for the future that all residents in a particular area must be involved in the regeneration process; no-one should be excluded.

The Director of Housing and Regeneration advised that in the run-up to last year's ballot, work had been focussed on Serpentine Court and its issues. However, since then, as the plans have developed, the programme had been widened to include the whole of the Lakes Estate. He went on to say that he would look into ways of improving consultation with residents and making the process more easily understood by all.

Councillor Baines commented that there were some very good residents' associations in Milton Keynes and that they should be involved in local consultations in order to achieve a real depth of involvement in regeneration projects.

Ms Marling also raised with the Committee the concerns of some residents over proposed changes to Warren Park, a focal point for the whole estate. However, the Committee was of the view that this was an opportunity for the community to think imaginatively about how it used local green spaces and that with the right infrastructure in place, this could include Waterhall Park, a Parks Trust linear park, which ran alongside the canal just across Stoke Road from the Lakes Estate.

Ms Marling further commented that she did not think the Committee had received the most up to date version of the proposed redevelopment of the wider Lakes Estate. She was advised, however, that due to statutory requirements on the printing of agendas it was not always possible to include the most recent version of a document in an agenda pack.

The Committee then discussed their findings from a recent site visit to Serpentine Court and the Lakes Estate, highlighting that pest control was an issue, with some properties suffering an infestation of silverfish and cockroaches, puddles of urine in the corridors and stairwells and the general poor level of maintenance of the properties they had seen. The Committee stressed the need for the properties in Serpentine Court to be properly maintained to as high a standard as possible until such time as the residents could move into their new homes.

The Committee also considered the proposals to install air pump heating to the new houses and learnt that under new legislation developers would not be allowed to install gas boilers to new properties after 2025. The Director of Housing and Regeneration explained that in house building terms that was a very close deadline and as the plan was to have construction of the first new properties started by 2021, there was very little point in installing gas boilers which would be obsolete in 4 years' time so an alternative had to be found. The Committee expressed a concern that the residents of Serpentine Court should not be used as guinea pigs for new technology and sought assurances that they would not be subject to higher energy costs as a result.

Councillor Baines, however, advised the Committee that the technology was not new and that the Council's Development Control Committee was already satisfied that it did work. The Committee requested that a report on air pump technology be brought to its next meeting and that a copy be sent to the Climate Change Task and Finish Group which was currently running.

As an adjunct, the Director of Housing and Regeneration advised that there was also a long-stop date by which all council residential properties would have to be converted from gas boilers to alternative forms of energy supply to meet the new requirements.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Director of Housing and Regeneration be requested to ensure that the Lakes Estate Residents' Association is consulted with and involved in any future discussions concerning the proposed regeneration of the wider Lakes Estate.
2. That the lessons learned from the resident participation activities as part of both the Lakes Estate/Serpentine Court and Fullers Slade regeneration projects be noted, so that all future regeneration projects ensure that discussions and consultations with residents are inclusive and that all local residents' groups are represented from the start of the project.
3. That a report setting out detailed information about the proposed air pump heating systems which will be used in the new properties on both the Lakes Estate and Fullers Slade be brought to the December meeting of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee.
4. That the report on air pump technology be shared with the current Climate Change Task and Finish Group as part of its work exploring how Milton Keynes becomes a greener, carbon neutral city by 2030.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 8:20 PM