
RE Contract Review Public Session

Member Working Group – Session in public

Date: 26th June 2017
Time: 7.00pm – 9.00pm
Location: Hendon Town Hall

Notes on key points from public comments

Resident 1 – ND

Expressed concern that planning service is open to fraud and corruption and that planning officers are not subject to the council's anti-fraud policy. Questioned awareness of the policy within RE. Requested an urgent inquiry. Suggested that checking of planning applications is not sufficiently robust.

Resident 2 – MMS

Planning

Focused on planning in the Station Road area. Suggested that the standard of care and due diligence given to applications and enforcement is insufficient and that the service's focus is on fee-generating developments. Suggested that rogue developers submitting misleading applications are not dealt with appropriately. Considered that there are moving goalposts, in that some issues are considered in terms of precedents, whilst others are considered "on their own merits". Referenced eight enforcement cases within 150 metres of her own property. Feels that throughout the planning process from application to build, Re's deficiencies and developers randomness has been protected by the council. There has been a destruction of amenities and the character of the local area has been diminished. Concerns are not replied to in a timely fashion, if at all. She feels that when a resident raises concerns the council see them as simply black and white. Whilst with contractors, there are many grey areas. In her view, Re is overwhelmed by the level of work and do not have adequate resource to be robust enough in their duties.

Resident 3 – PJ

Residents 3 and 4 referred to a single written submission, covering a range of issues in their locality.

Planning

Resident PJ began by highlighting his belief that LBB was not receiving VFM from the Re contract – it is an operational agreement for which a fee is paid, but no value is received in exchange. He felt that less affluent areas are even more affected and these wards deserve commensurate service for their council tax. Focus was on gusting caused by tall buildings encroaching on the public domain and existing buildings being re-clad. Questioned whether or not there had been wind studies and, if so, had they been given proper consideration. Felt that developers should be required to put it right (as with the Walkie Talkie building in the City).

In respect of parking, he highlighted the issue created by developers charging extra for parking spaces, which has shifted the problem onto the surrounding streets. Asked if developers could be asked to include price of parking spaces in property price (**potential policy issue**).

Resident 4 – JL

Highways and Pedestrian Safety

Highways inspector visits the neighbourhood frequently, observes and marks areas for repair, but then nothing is done.

Highlighted that surface dressing had been completed by Re, even though residents had asked that it not be done in that particular manner. Within a few weeks the surface was gone. It was scheduled to be redone in June 2017. Residents were notified not to park on the road so work could be completed, however no work took place.

Planning enforcement

Quoted case ENF/1247/16, where a three-bedroom house was converted into maisonettes, but residents were never informed about the change of use of the property. Despite repeated contacts with RE and the council, local residents have still not received any response.

Resident 1 added that the number of enforcement cases seems high compared to other boroughs. He felt the council does not do enough enforcement activity and that communication is poor.

Resident 5 – PA

Conflicts of interest

The resident pointed to her past experience and concern over any possible conflicts of interest within RE and with LBB. She felt that, unlike Enfield, LBB did not have a clear separation of duties. She went on to focus on the Local List, highlighting the delegated decision to commence the review and expressing the concern that the reported draft criteria did not meet Historic England's note 7 in respect of sites not in a conservation area.

Consultation

The resident highlighted that she had not been consulted on a particular planning application, despite her property being closer to the relevant site than other properties that were consulted. She questioned the quality of data used to plan consultation and whether or not this is monitored under the contract.

Resident 6 – RG

Planning

The resident expressed concerns over the changing character of the borough. She then focussed on the issue of a structure in her neighbour's garden and the process through which planning consent was granted. She felt that there was no support available for residents and that RE has no feeling for local heritage. She feels as if officers are working for developers and are intent on making profit, dismissing their duty as council employees. The resident feels that enforcement is weak and that LBB should be working with residents rather than against them.

Resident 7 – MO (representative)

Planning/pedestrian facilities

The resident focussed on the Dollis Valley Greenwalk development, expressing concern that cyclists had been prioritised over pedestrians and the lack of regard for natural spaces. The resident feels that there has been urbanisation of open spaces and footpaths. In her view, strategic planning documents prepared by Re seem to support this. She questioned whether RE is writing the policy, or are commissioners leading.

Transparency

The resident highlighted the difficulties with accessing information on the planning portal, particularly in respect of complex applications, where there are hundreds of documents and no clear referencing system.

Resident 8 – MH

Transparency

The resident sits on the Finchley Society planning committee and has inspected many planning applications. She focussed on the way that documents are posted online and the fact that references/filenames are not helpful. There is no guide on the order in which documents should be read. She questioned whether or not there are sufficient resources, or is it just sloppiness. She suggested that the final approved drawings should be marked separately from other documents.

Highways

The resident highlighted the difficulty in making contact with and getting responses from Highways. She felt that the “report a problem” website does not guide residents through the system and the “subject” used on response emails is not helpful, as it assumes that residents only have one query outstanding at a time.

Resident 9 – JD

The resident sought to highlight some of the contractual causes of the symptoms being raised by other residents. In doing so, he made the following points.

Transparency - ability to contact RE officers – for CSG there are named officers, but for Re there is no published organisation chart to see who is accountable for what.

Enforcement – there are not enough KPIs and questioned what is in the output specification.

Allocation of staff time – enforcement does not generate revenue, so is not prioritised, whereas planning briefs do.

The Local List commitment – should have been delivered in year one and it should not take the year three review to check this.

Data – is needed to monitor the contract, but is not available.

Customer satisfaction – the KPI has been missed in each of the last seven quarters, but nothing is done about it. This should be the most important aspect.

Conflicts of interest – how do we demonstrate independence of decision-making when providing planning consultancy.

APPENDIX H – notes from meeting held in public

Finance – questioned what is recovered on Brent Cross and the level of the rates charged.
Highlighted £1.4m overspend, yet the Joint Venture paid a similar amount in corporation tax, so what is being done to minimise tax liability?
Monitoring – questioned who is doing it and whether or not there is enough resource doing so.

Key themes identified by Members on the evening

- Enforcement needs to be strengthened
- Accessibility to planning applications needs to be improved
- Communication between planning and the public needs improvement
- Consultation needs to be stronger