



**Minutes of General Meeting
At 21/22 Prague Place, Blenheim Gardens Estate, SW2 5ED
On Tuesday 12 May 2009 at 7.00 pm**

Attendees:

Please see attendance register

Board members:

Maud Simmance, Anton Manickam, Selena Ellis, Diana Thompson, Pat Prendergast, Elsie Binder, Jackie Pereira and Greg Furlong

Guests:

PC Nick Head (Brixton Hill Safer Neighbourhood Team)

Bjarni Gudnason (Lambeth Living)

Chris Nicholson (Lib Democrats spokesperson)

Chuka Umunna (new Parliamentary candidate for Streatham)

Idowu Adiodun (Senior ASB Case Officer, Lambeth Living)

Officers:

Danny Howcroft (Estate Director)

Nilavra Mukaji (CEO United Residents Housing)

Minutes:

Tim Mathias

1 Minutes of last Meeting held on 27 Jan 2009

The meeting was opened by Selena Ellis, it was agreed that Selena would Chair the meeting in the absence of the Angela Bartley, the BG Chair.

2 Apologies

Apologies have been received from Angela Bartley and Sue Alldis.

3 Actions Points from the last meeting

AP4 - Feasibility study for stock options

Dan Howcroft has made contact with Lambeth Council, however the Audit Commission inspection will now take precedent. This will be revisited in October after the inspection has been completed.

AP6 – Support for Edible Gardens campaign

Jean Kerrigan operates the Edible gardens campaign, if you need to contact them please contact the Estate office and leave a message.

AP7 – Notify Lambeth to make arrangements to have wall removed

This has now been done, Edible Gardens/Organic Gardens now cultivated this area.

Additional Item - Presentation by Vincent Dmytriiev from Clapham Youth Centre

Dan Howcroft introduced Vincent Dmytriiev from Clapham Youth Centre, who works with a number of teenagers on the estate. They have done a lot of good work over the last year, including a trip to Wimbledon Theatre and a support for the Edible gardens campaign.

Vincent ran through a number of initiatives on the estate that CYC has organised. Considerable interest was expressed about the Edible Gardens campaign.

Pat Prendergast added that children had been actively involved in the maintenance of a new garden located at Kennington, it would be great if children got involved to encourage similar initiatives here.

Maud Simmance suggested that it would be useful to involve edible gardens in the upcoming Windmill festival. This was agreed unanimously.

Additional Item – Chuka Umunna – new Parliamentary candidate for Streatham seat

Chuka Umunna is the Labour parliamentary candidate for the Streatham Hill seat, they will contest the seat for the Labour Party when the sitting MP Keith Hill (Lab) retires at the next election. Chuka is engaged in introducing himself to the local community groups. As a parliamentary candidate, Chuka is concerned about how central government affects the lives of local people. He also has a role (via community surgeries) in ensuring local residents are dealt with fairly by local government, obviously this will often include housing issues.

It is a commonly held belief that Council Bureaucracy is inefficient. Chuka grew up in the local area, in his view although Lambeth Council has improved in the last twenty years it is commonly acknowledged that there are still a number of issues that need to be addressed.

In response to a question from Pat Prendergast, Chuka stated that he did not view the Youth & OAP votes as mutually exclusive. He has also worked with the Lambeth Pension Club. In his work as a solicitor, Chuka has used anti age discrimination laws to, for example, allow clients to work beyond normal retirement age.

Additional Item – Better Neighbourhoods

This was presented by of the Better Neighbourhoods team.

Bjarni works with the Highways department, and is involved in planning improvements on estates. They have recently approved a grant for a series of works on Blenheim Gdns Estate. Work will start on the main body of the estate on 6th July and will continue until October.

Work on Lyham Road (which runs past Prague Place) will start on 26th May.

If any problems are encountered you can contact Bjarni on 0207 926 0316 or the estate office.

Maud Simmance requested that trees planted would be a mature variety, Blenheim Gdns has had a problem historically with young trees being planted that keep on growing and growing.

Bjarni stated he had been assured by the parks department that the trees would be appropriate.

A number of residents requested some kind of fruit trees, however these require pollination to produce fruit (there are hardly any bumble bees left in the wild), so this may not be possible.

4 Lambeth ASB Team

This was introduced by Idowu Adiodun who runs one of the Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) teams run by Lambeth Council (there are currently two but they are merging). The team has worked with Blenheim Gdns on a number of occasions to tackle crime and ASB.

In 2007, the Labour Party decided to form a team to take a cross disciplinary approach to the subject of ASB. Part of their remit of the ASB team has been to introduce new approaches to tackle this problem, as part of this they have been involved in 'naming & shaming' perpetrators on a web-site. (Although this has had to be suspended temporarily following a Human Rights challenge.) The team has also set a dedicated hot-line to report ASB - 0207 926 4000.

The team also works to collate information on ASB from a variety of sources together, including diaries kept by local residents.

Brixton town centre in particular has had problems with drug dealers. Lambeth ASB team is working with the police to set up a dispersal zone in this area. In the last few months judgements against five local dealers have been obtained.

Question: How long will the ban on prostitutes working on Brixton Hill run?

Idowu: This is a Civil Injunction under Section 222, it will run indefinitely.

Question: How are you going to tackle the problem of gangs roaming around the Estate at all hours?

Idowu: Must be careful not to condemn all gangs of youths. In reality, most of them do no harm. If they are creating a lot of noise then you can call the police. If it is not an emergency then you should call either Brixton or Cavendish Road Police Station. The ASB team will also assist the Housing Office if it is decided that action is necessary.

It is important to look at this problem holistically, working out why youths are congregating in the local area, and to look at solutions that do not involve legal action. At Brixton Tube Station classical music is played on the sound system to deter youths congregating. Obviously, it would not be possible to do this on the estate, but this is an example of more imaginative solutions that can be employed. It is important to keep reporting any incidents either to the police, the ASB hotline or the TMO. ASB Officers can also bring up behaviour with parents or guardians. If required, the ASB team can work with the TMO and local residents to create an Action Plan.

Question: There is a problem with dogs, especially pit-bull types, on the estate.

Idowu: The ASB team has been doing a lot of research into this problem, which is far worse than they originally envisaged. Today the ASB team received three calls regarding canines, twenty two complaints have been received in the last month. There are significant issues around breeding dogs and using them for staged fights. The ASB team is working with Blenheim Gardens RMO and the RSPCA and is developing a borough wide pet policy. There is a particular problem around Brockwell Park (this is located three-quarters of a mile from Blenheim Gardens).

Selena Ellis and Dan Howcroft informed Idowu that the TMO had declined permission to keep pets on a number of occasions, however it was difficult to enforce these decisions through the courts.

Question: Are you considering Dog Control Orders?

Idowu: These are currently being considered.

Idowu distributed leaflets regarding the work of the ASB team. Further information can be obtained from www.lambeth.gov.uk/saferlambeth.

Idowu was thanked for his contribution to the General Meeting.

5 URH - Focus on Inspection

Nilavra Mukerji, who works as the temporary Chief Executive Officer of United Residents Housing was introduced to the meeting.

The reason that Nilavra attended the meeting tonight is to brief the residents concerning the upcoming Audit Commission inspection, which is due to take place between from the 19th to the 26th October. Blenheim Gdns will be inspected along with the three other TMOs which make up URH - Loughborough EMB, Roupell Park RMO and Waltham RMO. If URH obtains two stars or above, then £24 million of additional funding for Major Repairs will be released for the four estates, this would work out at approximately £4 million for Blenheim Gdns. It is important to realise that this is an 'all or nothing' situation, URH as a whole must obtain two stars.

URH has just secured extra funding for Capital works, this will be spent on mains on the estate along with additional work to bathrooms and estate works.

During the inspection the Audit Commission will look at all the services that the estate office is responsible for providing. This will include focus groups, to which residents will be invited.

Normally an ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation) will be responsible for all housing services. However United Residents Housing has a unique structure where services are provided by four TMOs, with the Capital Programme delivered by URH. The four TMOs are all very different. This can be a significant strength, but means that the structure will be different from the standard that the Audit Commission would expect. It will be important to formalise procedures across the different offices.

Question: What happens if URH does not obtain two stars in the inspection?

Nilavra Mukerji: URH can apply to be re-inspected. The earliest that this would occur would be July 2009. In this scenario it is important to address all the concerns that the AC raise in their report.

Question: There have been reports of problems with governance at Loughborough EMB.

Nilavra Mukerji: We are confident that these have been overcome, a new board has been appointed to oversee Loughborough estate. It is acknowledged that there are still performance problems at Loughborough (along with Roupell Park and Waltham) but these are being addressed. There have also been considerable problems around the Capital Programme and TMO Allowances, but these have now been resolved, so it should now be possible to concentrate on Performance issues.

Question: What constitutes a two star service?

Nilavra Mukerji: This is a judgement made by the inspectors after examining a wide range of issues – including a number of Performance indicators, Estate Inspections, implementation of the Capital Programme and Resident Satisfaction. It is very hard to define this in real terms. It is also important that URH also scores on the second judgement with promising prospects for improvement.

Nilavra Mukerji finished his presentation by saying that there are many opportunities for residents to get involved via mystery shopping exercise, the joint resident's panel and focus groups. Please contact the URH direct on 0207 326 0791 for details. One of the main advantages of being a smaller organisation is that there is far more local control, it is important to illustrate to the inspectors how significantly this has improved the living conditions for local residents.

6 End of Year Performance Information

Dan Howcroft gave out a handout detailing the RMO's performance levels against a number of indicators targets.

In summary all targets were hit with the exception of the Service Charge Collection Rate.

Dan Howcroft informed the meeting that there had been particular problems with this indicator which were beyond the control of the TMO. Specifically, two sets of final accounts, both for them unfavourable, were applied to the accounts within a few months. Lambeth Council was previously responsible for setting the charges and collating the final accounts. This function has now been taken over by URH, so it is hoped that further estimates will be more accurate making life easier for leaseholders on the estate.

Dan Howcroft continued, in addition to this the TMO has had two new significant achievements:-

1. The TMO has also managed to settle the allowance dispute with Lambeth, the agreement includes this financial year along with 2010/11 and 2011/12.

2. A Business Plan for the next three years has also been drafted. Copies are available from the TMO office.

Dan Howcroft asked for questions from the floor.

Question: What steps is the TMO taking to help residents during these difficult financial times?

Dan Howcroft: The level of rent charged is set by Lambeth Council, the TMO is powerless to change this. BGRMO realises that the rent increases – some in excess of £12-00 per week will make budgeting far more difficult for local families on low incomes. The TMO has written to all residents as part of a Welfare Benefits campaign. All staff have received Benefit Maximisation training.

7 Any Other Business

Jackie Pereira

Question: Garage fees are due to increase from 1 June 09. Will BGRMO receive a share of the profits?

Dan Howcroft: Although BGRMO has no say in setting the rents on the garages, yes they do have a share in the increased revenue. This will re-invested to improve the garages including new garage doors.

Diane Thompson

Question: Disabled people are entitled to a free garage. However, some households are not using the garage for a vehicle and are instead taking up a parking space.

Dan Howcroft: Lambeth Council has lifted restrictions on the use of garages, so the TMO is unable to take action in these cases at present, but was happy to take instructions from the governance board on this matter.

Chris Nicholson

Question: Chris is Liberal Democrat candidate for Brixton Hill, he asked for the opportunity to do a presentation at a future General Meeting. This was agreed.

Pat Prendergast

Question: Two children who were playing football in Windmill gardens were recently told to move on by park keepers.

Dan Howcroft: This is not right, children have the right to play football in the park, however they should avoid repeatedly kicking the ball against the wall. Dan Howcroft was happy to raise this matter with Cllr Reed.

The meeting closed at 8.45pm.