

Minutes of Upper Street Area housing Panel

18/9/06

Present	<p>Staff (DS) David Selo – Director of Resources (JF) Jon Farrant – Senior Area Housing Manager (CD) Chris Donovan – Partnership officer</p> <p>Panel Members (BP) Brian Potter – Pleasant Place – Chair (MB) Mary Bowman – 1 in a 1000 (CC) Christian Clark – Marquess (Western Isles) (MP) Mike Padfield – Mersey (FN) Felix Ngonadi -Bentham</p> <p>Observers (JC) Joan Coupland – Councillor (SC) Shelley Coupland – Councillor (OC) Oliver Crudgington – Marquess (St Pauls)</p>	
Apologies	Ann-Marie Greensmith – NEETRA Elsa Topping – 1 in a 1000	
Minutes of July meeting	<p>P1 Minutes of previous meeting</p> <p>BP Site visit was carried out by BP, an architect and a surveyor – not Cllr Stacey and the Contractors Ujima not Keirs.</p> <p>P3 PF12</p> <p>BP Is there a dowry</p> <p>DS Didn't know (<i>ed note checked with Jane Trethewey – there is no dowry</i>)</p> <p>P4 Office Closures</p> <p>BP has spoken to chairs of other panels and they are unanimous in not wanting offices closed – they ask HFI to re-consider.</p> <p>Residents attending the FITA conference on anti-social behaviour were also unanimous on this</p> <p>P8 Land Disposal</p> <p>JC If Popham/Cumming Community Centre is sold wants social housing on site, not affordable housing</p> <p>MP Why can't council build housing?</p>	

	<p>DS Current government subsidy system means that councils cannot afford to build new housing but housing associations can. The new Secretary of State, Ruth Kelly, has signalled that this will change. Some Councils and their Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) are making plans to start building again.</p> <p>BP Spoke to Eamon McGoldrick about this on Saturday – ALMO will own any new build properties not the Council – this will mean that if, in the future, the ALMO is sold off then ownership of the properties will pass with ownership of the ALMO.</p> <p>DS ALMOs do not currently own property.</p> <p>BP HFI is bound to achieve 3* status soon, it will then be able to own property.</p> <p>Minutes accepted as true record</p>	
<p>Item 4 Restructuring Area Housing Offices</p>	<p>BP If panel discusses and makes recommendations it will be accepting office closures and the discussion will count as the consultation. Suggests that we do not do so.</p> <p>DS Introduced paper</p> <p>HFI board have decided to move down to four offices. Staff implementing this decision are recommending option B which will include Canonbury ward in the area run from Northway House but not St Peters or St Marys is their preference.</p> <p>Views are sought from the panel about which option to go for and names for the areas</p> <p>Other decisions to make relate to the area panels – should there be one or two per office?</p> <p>HFI realise that all the options will affect the residents currently served by Northway House more than those of other offices and that there will be an increase in distance for some residents travelling to their own office.</p> <p>New technology means that HFI are moving toward systems whereby any resident can go to any office which is convenient.</p> <p>Now that offices do not take rent and the call centre, HFI Direct, deals with repairs the number of callers at the area offices has dropped dramatically</p> <p>MP If he wishes to make a complaint about caretaker would he be re-directed to his 'own' office?</p> <p>JF If you went to an office about rent arrears any office could look</p>	

	<p>your account up and make an agreement about arrears/</p> <p>MP Understands that but what about complaints about locally delivered services?</p> <p>JF It will be a gradual move.</p> <p>QAOs will be out and about on the estates more often, doing fortnightly inspections instead of monthly ones. Inspections are done quarterly with TRA reps. Residents will be able to see staff on the estates</p> <p>OC not if the resident is working</p> <p>JF Boleyn, manages less than average at 3,500 properties and had a smaller work force. If one person is sick and another on leave this causes staff problems – not enough bodies to go around.</p> <p>We want to see about 5000 properties per office, this gives enough staff to cover.</p> <p>Currently each visitor at Upper St (the busiest office) costs £4. Each one to Boleyn Road costs £14!</p> <p>Closing offices has advantages other than saving money- workable team sizes, clear lines of command and stronger specialist teams in areas of work like antisocial behaviour</p> <p>The downside of distance to offices can be ameliorated by increasing availability of home visits for the vulnerable, increased use of IT solutions like the planned use of a customer services module which will enable any office to call up a history of residents complaints/service requests and to make appointments for staff from other offices.</p> <p>We are piloting the use of such a module at Central St for antisocial behaviour complaints and will be looking to expand its use and roll out to other offices.</p> <p>IT means that estate based surgeries on estates like the Andover and Mayville also become practical.</p> <p>MP Will there be a loss of staff.</p> <p>JF Yes, but limited to customer services, with fewer counters to run there will be slightly fewer staff in that area, but real saving will be on buildings</p> <p>MP Current queues at Northway House and Lyon St are often over 35 minutes – these plans will make those offices even busier – how is that a service improvement?</p>	
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JF At Northway House we are already planning on extending the counter and increasing the number of private interview rooms.

JC As Councillor for St Mary's resents residents being 'shunted' away to less convenient offices.

OC How does IT mean that there will be more staff presence on estates?

JF By using handheld PDAs staff can order repairs whilst on estates, remote access to records mean that on-site decisions can be made and orders chased up, wireless connections mean that estate surgeries can be held from, for example a mobile office.

BP Council tenants are too used to seeing reductions in services, shrinking front line staff levels. Fewer offices and fewer staff do not mean a better service. Not everyone want to use call centres with their endless press button A options or either has or wants a computer. We are moving toward one impersonal office at Highbury House and all work being done in a call centre in India.

JF Is a convinced de-centralist but a balance has to be struck and lots of convenient offices does mean that teams in each are too small to provide efficient services

BP Then employ more staff

JF It is not just a matter of numbers but of distribution, for example both Boleyn and Upper St have one antisocial behaviour officer. At Boleyn the caseload is 40 cases, at Upper St it is 120 cases. By locating them together the resource would not be reduced but would be more efficiently used.

BP has been fighting reductions in services since there were 24 offices, services and consultation has been consistently degraded in that time.

MP residents have consistently been promised easy access to their office. If Mersey Estate goes to Lyon St residents will have to take 4 buses at a cost of £6, which is absurd.

JF The point is how often they will need to go to Lyon St. Now that offices do not take rent most callers are about Housing Benefit. These forms can be taken to any office already Repairs are already reported through HFI direct.

Home visits and ability of residents to use the office of their choice should mean that it should be rare for a resident to have to visit a specific office.

<p>MB Call centre staff are so rude to people.</p> <p>JF We consistently get feedback that staff at area offices are polite and helpful but lack knowledge. With larger teams it will be possible to develop specialist teams who can keep up to date more easily.</p> <p>BP It all comes down to money – HFIs management fee will be cut because of PFI2 and they need to make it up.</p> <p>JF True, but the move is also a positive one which will improve the service offered.</p> <p>BP Odd that these advantages have only been identified now HFI want to cut spending</p> <p>DS Correct about cuts – with PFI1 &2, stock transfers and right to buy we have lost a substantial part of our stock but we are always looking for ways to improve our service delivery. There are now a variety of ways of doing so; including increased home visiting and estate surgeries.</p> <p>BP We all know that level of home visits will not occur. The internet is not available to everyone.</p> <p>The important point is that the panel sends a message back that they do not want office closures. After consultation at last panel this is what Upper St recommended. No-one has had courtesy to reply and panel is now asked to recommend names for reduced offices and choose which areas they will manage.</p> <p>The decision by the board to close offices was a split decision, carried by the chair of HFI using casting vote. Resident’s representatives all said no.</p> <p>MP Concerned that if panel does not express opinion they will have no input</p> <p>JF Option 3 keeps Mersey under Northway House</p> <p>BP Should not discuss options. Upper St is main office affected but accepting any option will impact most on Boleyn and Isledon – panels should support each other.</p> <p>Put to vote motion</p> <p>Upper St Area Housing Panel wishes to send a strong message to HFI that they should reconsider office closures. The panel refuses to consider recommending one of the options lest they be seen to support closure.</p> <p>Passed unanimously</p>	
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<p>Decent Community Strategy</p>	<p>MB What is this for – it seems to be waffle</p> <p>BP most important point is in 3.7, there must be proper consultation rather than residents just being told and that counting as consultation.</p> <p>There is a danger of yet more lip service</p> <p>DS The report is about how HFI work with residents and local groups and services to create a better community</p> <p>MB More carers are needed</p>	
<p>Estate Services Improvement Group</p>	<p>DS Report is about extending the current caretaking service improvement group beyond caretaking issues. The panel is asked to nominate a member to work with group</p> <p>MB Wants to move back to resident caretakers, they were the human face of Council Housing. Used to have an excellent caretaker but he was forced to retire against his wishes because he was reckoned to be too old</p> <p>JF This is not a formal review but is about getting a group of residents together who will meet with director. JF and senior area housing managers to discuss improving and refocusing caretaking, rubbish collection, Greenspace contract and communal repair services.</p> <p>Intention is to work with residents to improve and refocus services and encourage good practice.</p> <p>Christian Clark of Marquess (Western Isles) volunteered.</p> <p>Cllr Joan Coupland would also be interested in sitting in – JF will check how this can be done.</p> <p>First meeting will be in 3-4 weeks.</p> <p>BP Can there be a written report referred back to panel JF minutes can be added to panel meetings as an agenda item.</p>	<p>JF</p> <p>CD</p>
<p>HFI Update</p>	<p>BP 3.4.2 has been at a number of meetings where residents have queried how satisfaction levels were queried. Key West explained sampling theory but no-one believed it</p> <p>There were under a hundred people attending the antisocial behaviour conference run by FITA in a hall capable of holding over 500.</p> <p>BP believes that events like the silver service event were designed</p>	

	<p>to obscure his important meeting. Not a single Lib Dem councillor attended although all Labour ones did. BP not impressed with the reasons he was given.</p> <p>BP queried what publicity had been displayed – he called at Upper St and no-one knew about conference and no posters were displayed.</p> <p>CD confirmed he had received one A3 poster and one A4 version. As there was no covering note these were not displayed until it had been checked that they were authorised. Posters were then displayed and an A3 copy sent to all TRAs to inform their members. In future if anyone wants to publicise an event it would be better to speak have them sent out by publicity dept who can instruct customer services to display etc. Failing that if any PPO is contact3ed they will get clearance and inform colleagues in other offices of what should be done</p>	
Board Meetings	<p>BP reminded panel members that the meetings start at 6:30 pm and the first 20 mins are an open forum for questions</p> <p>Elections for the chair and vice chair are due. Is the chair still elected by sealed vote?</p> <p>DS That is a decision for the board</p>	
AOB	<p>CC Grass cutting on the Marquess has been erratic. Area outside 86 Caldly Walk needs clearing and replanting – promised in a letter from Jenny Greenfield 22/6/06</p> <p>JF Contract with Greenspace is due for renewal in 2008 and the Estate Services Working Group will be looking at terms.</p> <p>CD The area CC is talking about was part of the last section of the project and has only just been handed over to area office. It has now been added to contract and should be cut regularly. Will raise with estate services to confirm.</p> <p>MB Tree outside 273 Wakelin House still needs trimming – CD will raise with estate services</p> <p>JF Jenny Greenfield will attend the next panel to update on Tenants Compact works</p> <p>MP Is there an update on communal areas?</p> <p>JF There are pilot schemes running to choose between two systems. Plan is to select most appropriate and install throughout borough in 2008</p>	<p>CD</p> <p>CD</p>