

BENHILL LEASEHOLDERS' MEETING NOTES 18 MARCH 2021

Attendees: Leaseholders from Benhill Estate
Officers: Geeta Le Tissier (LBS), Ian Simpson (Communities First), Lauren Fabregas & Lewis Toop (SHP), Louis Blair & Palma Black (CF).
Observers: Bev Brigden (Sutton Leaseholders Assoc), Cllr David Bartolucci

1. INTRODUCTIONS

Ian welcomed introduced himself and the team from Communities First as the host of the online meeting. Communities First have recently been appointed as Independent Tenants and Homeowners Advisor (ITHA) for Benhill. Phoebe Connell, the Vice Chair of the Benhill Residents Steering Group (RSG), introduced herself as the Chair of the meeting. She is a resident leaseholder on the estate.

Palma Black explained residents could ask questions in the chat feature, which would be monitored during the meeting, and added that they could add their contact details if they wished to. Ian said Communities First hope to be doorknocking on the estate and meeting residents in person as soon as Covid guidelines allow. In the meantime, the team were available by Freephone and email and they can set up small WhatsApp and Zoom meetings on request.

2. QUESTIONS

Ian asked residents to table questions before he gave a brief presentation. These questions are set out in Section 4 of these notes.

3. PRESENTATION – REGENERATION AND LEASEHOLDERS

Ian went through the key elements of his presentation.

Commitments to Homeowners – Sutton Council made a series of commitments to homeowners on regeneration projects in its Committee Report in October 2018. This includes an Estate Regeneration Rehousing and Compensation Scheme. Ian summarised key elements of the Council's commitments to resident leaseholders, including the opportunity to move to a new home on the estate if it is redeveloped. Lauren confirmed that these commitments still apply.

Equity Share Costs for Resident Homeowners – Ian explained the Equity Share offer, which means resident leaseholders on regeneration schemes can move to new homes on the estate without increasing their existing housing costs. Lauren also explained Options A-G in the Council's Commitments from 2018 which offer a variety of options to meet the needs of individual lessees.

Options for Benhill – Ian ran through the options that will need to be considered in the forthcoming Option Appraisal for the estate, including refurbishment, infill and full redevelopment. The Mayor's guidance for regeneration schemes requires landlords seeking funding for new homes to complete a full Option Appraisal. Ian added that some options may not be realistic in terms of viability or practical delivery and could be ruled out at various stages of the process.

Options Appraisal – If regeneration were the preferred option after consultation, the Mayors Guidance will require a residents' ballot if Greater London Assembly (GLA) funding is sought. The Council's existing commitments would form the basis

of the “Landlord Offer” on which residents would vote. However, the offer document would also be shaped by local issues and consultation, which could include a “Benhill Residents Charter” to set out additional guarantees.

Resident Ballot – A ballot on the Landlord Offer would be a Yes / No vote decided by a simple majority of those voting. Those eligible to vote would be secure Council tenants, homeowners who have been resident for at least one year and residents who have been on Sutton’s Housing Register for at least 12 months.

Ian said leaseholders and the RSG should be fully involved in the Option Appraisal process to ensure their voices can shape the future of their estate.

Other Issues to clarify – Ian added that any redevelopment of Benhill Estate might also involve new community facilities within an overall masterplan. Lauren added residents would have the opportunity to get involved in the selection of an architect, and that they should contact her if they are interested in this.

4. HOMEOWNER ISSUES

The homeowner questions were:

Q- What can we do if we are opposed to demolition?

A – Redevelopment could only go ahead if it is supported by a majority of residents in a ballot. In light of the tenure mix on Benhill, Sutton would need to develop a Landlord Offer with broad appeal to meet the needs of existing tenants and leaseholders.

Q - How will the size of new homes compare with existing ones?

A – Space standards for new homes have increased in recent years and are set out in the GLA London Plan. This includes specific requirements for room and home sizes, storage and private external space. The architects will be able to provide comparisons when they have developed their initial design.

Q - What will be the impact of ‘decanting’ (temporary moves if redevelopment)?

A – Only the residents in the first phase might need to move temporarily; other households could move directly to a new home on the estate as these can be built in advance. Any tenants and leaseholders that need to move twice would be supported by the Council in finding temporary homes in the local area (or elsewhere in the borough if preferred).

Q - How will we cope with the inconvenience?

A – The Council would need to provide both practical and financial support throughout any relocation process. Limiting the disturbance caused to residents living on an estate undergoing redevelopment or refurbishment can be considered within a Residents Charter.

Q - Is it worth considering lease extensions?

A – This would depend on individual circumstances, but Ian thought it might be prudent to wait for the outcome of the Option Appraisal. Communities First are happy to advice individual residents in confidence on this and other issues.

Q - How is the regeneration affordable (both to homeowners and the Council)?

A – Lauren outlined the range of options available to resident homeowners, including equity share arrangements.

The Council would need funding from a variety of sources to make regeneration viable. In addition to GLA funding for new homes, it would require cross subsidy from selling some new homes and additional borrowing.

Q - Would refurbishment mean service charges for major works?

A - Ian said a refurbishment option often involves work to the buildings that qualify for major works charges. He added that it was important that homeowners understand the potential implications of all options being considered.

Q - What will be the impact of Covid-19?

A – The lockdown is obviously impacting severely on the way consultation can take place. It also may have a longer-term impact on the housing market. Communities First and the Council hope to resume outreach work and home visits on the estate as soon as possible.

Q - How will we ensure we get Market Value prices for our homes?

The Council is required to value homes at market value as if the regeneration were not taking place. It will pay for an additional independent valuation for homeowners on request. Geeta confirmed the Council would pay full market value for homes, as well as home loss and disturbance payments.

Q - What is the tenure split on the estate?

Lauren said there are currently 137 resident leaseholders, 242 secure tenants, 56 non resident leaseholders and 6 St Mungo's tenants.

Q - How soon could Sutton re-ballot if the vote is No?

There is no time requirement, but in practice the landlord would need significant revisions to the Offer Document. Ian felt that this would need at least one year to 18 months between any first and second ballot.

Q - Will the new homes be more expensive?

A – They are likely to be higher values as they would be new homes with modern facilities and amenities. The Council is making an Equity Share offer available to ensure that existing leaseholders can buy one of the new homes without increasing housing costs. The Equity Share offer would mean residents using their existing equity and home loss payment to buy a new home, but they would not need a mortgage if they did not previously have one or pay any rent on the proportion retained by the Council.

Ian added that routine service charges are often higher for new homes due to the added amenities and services in newer blocks, but that major works charges may be lower than for older blocks.

Q - Can the Council force residents to move?

A- If required after a successful ballot and the subsequent planning application, the Council could use Compulsory Purchase (CPO) powers to take ownership of properties on the estate. But this is an expensive and time-consuming process and councils always prefer to negotiate with leaseholders on an individual basis prior to a CPO being in place.

5. STAYING INVOLVED

Phoebe noted this was the first leaseholders meeting since the Council restarted on regeneration proposals for the estate. As a leaseholder she fully understood the concerns and worries of other residents and felt homeowners need to work together and speak effectively with one voice to the Council. Leaseholder meetings would be held in future when there are pressing issues to discuss.

She thanked all residents for attending and encouraged attendees to come to the Residents Steering Group meeting being held on Zoom on Monday 29th March at 6.30pm. The link is <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86252232132>

Contact details are as follows:

Communities First – Tel 0300 365 7150, email: benhill@communitiesfirst.uk.com

Sutton Council – estateregeneration@sutton.gov.uk

Benhill Residents Steering Group - Vice Chair email: brsg.vicechair@hotmail.com

Links to helpful websites:

Mayor of London - Better Homes for Local People, Good Practice Guide to Estate Regeneration (February 2018)

<https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/better-homes-for-local-people-the-mayor-s-good-practice-guide-to-estate-regeneration.pdf>

GLA Capital Funding Guide, Section 8 - Mayor of London - Funding Conditions that require Resident Ballots for Estate Regeneration Projects (July 2018)

https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_cfg_section_8_resident_ballots_-_18_july_2018.pdf

GLA Housing Standards - Minor Alterations to the London Plan (March 2016)

https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/housing_standards_malp_for_publication_7_april_2016.pdf

HEB Report - Estate Regeneration Rehousing and Compensation Scheme (15th October 2018)

<https://moderngov.sutton.gov.uk/ielIssueDetails.aspx?IId=40537&PlanId=0&Opt=3#A139427>

Estate Regeneration Good Practice Guide (December 2016)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/estate-regeneration-good-practice-guide>

Benhill Estate Regeneration Webpage

https://www.sutton.gov.uk/info/200502/housing_advice_and_options/1781/benhill_estate_regeneration

Sutton Link

https://consultations.tfl.gov.uk/trams/sutton-link/user_uploads/sutton-link-consultation-report.pdf

Report It (Sutton Council)

https://www.sutton.gov.uk/info/200447/report_it or telephone: 020 8770 5000

Report It (Sutton Housing Partnership)

<https://www.suttonhousingpartnership.org.uk/report-it> or telephone: 020 8915 2000 or contact Lara Amota (SHP Housing Manager) on 202 8915 2181