

## **Southwark Overview & Scrutiny Committee Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> February 2021**

My name is Eileen Conn. I live in Peckham. I have for many years coordinated the local action group Peckham Vision, where our focus is on town centre operations as well as planning, and the Southwark Planning Network (SPN), which links active people and groups across the borough to share information and give each other mutual support.

I am also an active member of Just Space which is a London networking group in relation to the London Plan. My contribution this evening comes from this grassroots experience.

I want to thank you for inviting us and other community groups to come and speak with you in this important scrutiny of regeneration in the borough.

I am going to cover three points this evening:

- First, the need to reorient regeneration from demolition-led redevelopment to reuse-led regeneration.
- Second, the need to break out of the straitjacket stopping us from building housing that people in the borough need.
- Third, the need to transform the relationship between the Council and community groups in relation to regeneration and redevelopment.

These are huge topics so this can be only a whistle stop tour but I would like to leave you with some useful points. I will be glad to follow up details as necessary afterwards.

### **1. REGENERATION, LED BY RE-USE**

Much community experience of 'regeneration' is that it is demolition-led with ineffective community engagement, as with the Council plans for three large sites in the heart of Peckham town centre. The Peckham Multi Storey, Peckham Rye Station and Copeland Park sites all contained old buildings full of small enterprises. But the plans in each case one after the other over 15 years called for complete demolition and redevelopment for 'regeneration'.

The community had to campaign long and hard against these destructive policies. As a result, through a community-led approach seeing the facts on the ground about the existing buildings, their uses and their self regeneration potential for the area, the community campaigns in each case succeeded in reversing them. It is a

prime example of the potential for self regeneration without demolition and redevelopment, with beneficial effects beyond the individual sites concerned.

The lesson from this is that all development in the name of 'regeneration' must start with an audit of the facts on the ground before any redevelopment plans are ever begun, verified with the local stakeholders. Last year I wrote an essay on this as *inside-out development* at the request of the Grosvenor Estate for their website, as a good example for their new Community Charter. The link is in the footnotes at the end.

I know from grassroots experiences across London that this demolition-led redevelopment approach to regeneration is the norm in the industry. For example in the Old Kent Road Opportunity Area, the drive has been to encourage the assembly of land irrespective of its current uses and occupiers, to enable major redevelopment.

In addition, carbon emissions from demolition and new construction are a significant contributor to the climate emergency. A reorientation away from demolition-led regeneration and a preference for re-use is essential for consistency with the climate emergency policies.

The new Development Charter now requires a 'fact-based audit' of existing assets and uses for any planning application for redevelopment. But there is no guidance for its production or its role in the planning process. It needs to be used as a strong benchmark to ensure that the regeneration provides significant net benefits for the existing community. We would like to ask for your support for the collaborative creation of Council guidance in a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on how the fact based audit should be produced and its role in the planning process.

## **2. BUILDING HOUSING THAT PEOPLE IN THE BOROUGH NEED**

There is a calamitous crisis in housing in London. But this is a crisis of a particular kind, that is the lack of housing that most people can afford. To address this, planning policy has been for many years that new developments should provide a **minimum** of 35% 'affordable' housing. But this is failing to meet the need for housing, and the deficit gets worse. Some of the problems are:

- 35% seems usually to become a maximum, and even some of that can be unaffordable as 'affordability' can mean up to 80% of market rent. In new developments in London that is outside the means of most people.
- This means that a minimum of 65% of new developments given permission are **officially 'unaffordable'**.

- The figures showed a few years ago (2014) that only 5% of households in Southwark earned more than £46,000 a year. And yet to buy or rent at market levels needed in many cases well over that eg at around £100k and more a year income.
- Taking inflation into account, this still means that probably over 90% of local households can't buy or rent new housing. So it isn't meeting the housing need. So who is it for?
- The fact that 65% housing, given planning permission, is being **officially classed as 'unaffordable'**, shows something is seriously wrong and unsustainable.
- There is a very welcome move to increase the 35% minimum to 50%. But as the housing crisis is because the vast majority can't pay market rates for sale or rent, it is still unsustainable and unviable to give permission for 50% housing that is officially unaffordable. The upper limit on unaffordable new housing should be more like only 10-20%.

We all know that this is not easily within the powers of local councils to change overnight. But there are two actions I would ask the Committee to consider which may help move out of the straitjacket of current thinking. These are that the Council should:

- Bring together and publicise annually
  - the income levels of the population in the borough
  - the range of sale prices and rent levels across the borough and
  - a simple table showing the discrepancy between these.
- join with community groups and others to inform, educate and engage the public – organisations and residents - about the inadequacies of the demolition-led redevelopment approach, and the search for alternative solutions.

### **COUNCIL AND COMMUNITY WORKING TOGETHER FOR REGENERATION**

Across the borough local people voluntarily take up local issues as they arise, and develop links with each other and form important local networks. In many cases they have a longevity and continuity of local knowledge which can be very valuable for planning and regeneration. We need to develop ways to enable this to be accessible to policy makers. One of the keys here is the working relationship between these local ward activists and their ward councillors.

I was interested to hear at the Committee's previous meeting with community representatives, Cllr Buck's comment about ward councillors and community groups working together at ward level before redevelopment plans get initiated. I strongly support this. We could think of it as the local ward network bringing together all those who take an interest in planning and regeneration and related matters. It could be a constructive way for local people to develop an organised

way to work with each other and their ward councillors on any matters the Council formally wanted to consult the neighbourhood about.

I would be very glad to explain ways we could do this, and exchange thoughts with any councillors on this committee who are interested.

## SUMMARY

My comments have suggested some thoughts for your consideration covering:

1. Collaborative creation of a Council SPD on the production and role of 'fact based audits' before regeneration.
2. Annual publication of borough figures for income levels, housing sale prices and rent levels, and the discrepancy between these.
3. Collaboration to inform, educate and engage the public about the inadequacies of the demolition-led redevelopment approach, and the search for alternatives.
4. Exploring my ideas about ward councillors and community groups working together at ward level on planning and regeneration.

Thank you

Eileen Conn MA (Oxon) MBE  
9 February 2021

Peckham Vision co-ordinator and SPN co-ordination

<https://www.peckhamvision.org>

[https://www.peckhamvision.org/wiki/Southwark\\_Planning\\_Network](https://www.peckhamvision.org/wiki/Southwark_Planning_Network)

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Woman of Influence for 2020 - The Planner

\* Southwark News - <https://bit.ly/2zUoHtD>

\* essay on *Inside out Development* - <https://bit.ly/30EQ7Ph>

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about Peckham Vision -

\* <https://www.copelandpark.com/blog/2020/01/15/peckham-vision-and-a-history-of-copeland-park/>

\* Peckham Vision studio in the Bussey Building and shop in Holdrons Arcade will reopen when it is Covid-safe to do so.

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Peckham Vision relies on voluntary contributions for its work as a local citizens action group. Our information is created by volunteers and made freely available for the community. But if you benefit from our work, we hope you will donate to our funds. You can do this through the home page of our website, or email us for bank details.

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