

“Fine Words Butter No Parsnips”

Old English Proverb



A Collated Response by Golden Lane Residents to the City of London’s Draft Housing Strategy for 2014 – 2019

Golden Lane Estate Residents Association

April 2014

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This document has been compiled by the elected Committee of the Golden Lane Estate Residents Association (GLERA) in order to provide a collated and coherent response from Golden Lane residents to the City of London's call for consultation on its Draft Housing Strategy for 2014 – 2019 (the Strategy).
- 1.2. To facilitate this, the Strategy was reviewed and discussed by individual GLERA Committee Members, and the opinions of other residents were actively sought on points of interest.
- 1.3. For example, on Tuesday 25/03/2014 a group of five residents (ages 22 – 86) discussed key elements of the strategy with a Committee Member in an informal meeting in the bar of the Golden Lane Community Centre. Their views on issues such as allocations policy, "Better Homes" and stronger communities have been incorporated into this document along with their views and actual ***lived experience*** in the area of supporting disabled and older residents.
- 1.4. All the views contained in this document are the views of Golden Lane Estate residents. Our aim is to provide a collated and coherent overview of resident's responses to the views contained in the City's draft Strategy, and set them in the context of our own ***lived experience*** as tenants and leaseholders. However we also recognise that some residents may wish to comment on the draft Strategy in a personal and individual capacity, and we would encourage them to do so.



2. Background

- 2.1. The draft Strategy, and residents' responses to it, do not exist in a vacuum. We recognise that City Officers' wish to produce a Strategy of which the City can be proud and we welcome the opportunity to positively contribute, not only to the development of such a strategy, but also to its active implementation.
- 2.2. For residents however, there is often a long personal history of living on Golden Lane Estate and dealing with the City's Housing Department; their responses are often coloured by this experience. We readily acknowledge that City Officers have great **professional expertise** in development of strategies, writing of Committee Reports etc. and also understand their wish to present the City in the best possible light. However residents have the **personal experience** of living on Golden Lane and using City services, and often find this experience to be at variance from that outlined in Committee Reports (hence the title of this document).
- 2.3. We believe that we need **both** the **expertise** and the **experience** to plan and deliver a Housing Strategy that will actually be meaningful for us as residents.

“Consultation” on the Draft Housing Strategy – and why the process highlights resident’s concerns.

- 2.4. At its meeting on 10/01/2014 the Community & Children's Services Committee accepted the Draft Housing Strategy and agreed it should be put out to consultation with a closing date for comment of 31/03/2014. For the City residents of Golden Lane the subsequent sequence of events in this “consultation” were as follows: -
 - On 06/03/2014 (almost two months after the Committee decision) the draft document was posted onto the Housing webpage – no attempt was made at this point by Officers to inform residents, either collectively (through GLERA) or individually, of the documents existence and the consultation process; neither was the document posted on the most logical webpage (to which individuals are actually directed if they are looking for current consultations on the City’s website) the Consultation Diary;
 - On 18/03/2014 a GLERA Committee Member became aware of the draft document and circulated to other Members as a matter of urgency for discussion, comment and wider circulation to residents;
 - On the following day (19/03/2014) a GLERA Committee Member contacted the Chairman of the Community & Children's Services Committee to express concern about this process. Following the Chairman’s helpful intervention, the closing date for submissions was moved to 11/04/2014 and other actions were taken to raise the profile of the document;
 - It also transpired that notification about the draft document and consultation process was to be included in a newsletter due to be delivered to Golden Lane residents on 24/03/2014 **[i.e. residents would be notified a mere 7 days before the closure of consultation - in spite**

of the fact the process had been agreed by Community & Children's Services Committee some 72 days before this].

2.5. The idea that “consultation” on a document which could have such a potential impact upon the homes and lives of Golden Lane residents can amount to simply posting the document on a website, and then advising people of its existence 7 days before the closing date for comments, can only appear at such drastic and nullifying odds with the supposed aims and florid words in the Strategy about: -

- *“empowered communities”;*
- *“(we will) consult widely with residents”;*
- *“(we will) work with our residents”;*
- *“(we will) work more flexibly and closely with....our tenants”;*
- *“Consultation with existing residents will be an essential feature of our approach”.*

2.6. Unfortunately, many residents believe they have seen and heard all of these words and phrases before. What they perceive to be lacking is the actions to actually back them up, a real sense of coherence and consistency around strategy and the willingness of City Officers to actually engage with residents (rather than immediately seek a defensive position when questions are asked). The GLERA Committee believe that we can work constructively with Members and Officers to help overcome these perceptions and make the Strategy a reality – however we acknowledge this is a challenge and listed below is a sample of comments that illustrate the reasons for these deeply held perceptions: -

“But is this ever really going to happen?” – understandable comment from a long time Great Arthur House resident at a meeting to discuss the building’s replacement curtain wall (discussions that have been going on for over a decade).

SHED CHARGES - TAKE 1 - *“We are charging for the sheds to help sort out who has how many and make sure they are used properly and fairly”* – Housing Officer’s verbal response to Golden Lane residents query on the introduction of shed charges at a GLERA meeting.

SHED CHARGES - TAKE 2 - *“As you know, the Committee agreed to reintroduce* charges for storage sheds as part of a package of savings and income measures which were needed to address a significant HRA overspend, year on year”* – Housing Officer’s written response to formal query on the introduction of shed charges.

[* NOTE – It is difficult to understand how shed charges can be “reintroduced” at Golden Lane when residents have never previously paid them!].

3. Individual Comments on the Strategy

Policy on Consultation & Feedback

- 3.1. There is no direct mention of Residents Associations (RA). Corporation Officers have been attending RA meetings on a regular basis for several years with good results. Many issues of common interest have been discussed and voted on at RA meetings and then raised with officers. These issues would otherwise have been overlooked, often at great expense and risk. There have been suggestions that this system will stop in favour of officer led quarterly meetings where residents will be dealt with individually. We would like to see a continuation of the current system of Officers attending RAs to answer common interest queries, as well as the proposed officer led meetings, and this should be mentioned in the policy.
- 3.2. There needs to be a better method of publishing proposals for comment (as highlighted by the procedure used for this document). Comments and responses or explanations should also be published so that everyone knows what has been said (with agreement of those making them).
- 3.3. *“The City uses all the “right on” phrases like “empowered” and “working with” but I doubt they actually know what they mean. It often seems to depend upon a particular officer at the City and their interpretation; someone leaves and the next person just decides they’ll do it differently. We spend our lives here but we’re expected to jump through all the hoops to suit them – and there is absolutely no concept of organisational knowledge and continuity. If it wasn’t so deeply disappointing, it would actually be laughable how many times in meetings we have had to tell **them** about decisions **they** have made in the past. The process of “consultation” for this Strategy is fairly typical of how we are usually treated – and it compares very unfavourably with other public organisations and many other housing authorities. Actually, we were supposed to get “real” consultation and involvement about 10 or 12 years ago – they even employed a woman (using our rent and tax money of course) to sort it out; I remember her coming to the Association meeting to tell us about her “role” in “the process”. Nothing much changed of course, then about 5 or 6 years ago another woman came and said exactly the same. I suppose we are about due another one?”*
- [N.B. It is believed that this resident was referring to Justine Beaumont (City Consultation Officer) in the first instance and Carla Keegans (Resident Involvement Officer) in the second].



- 3.4. The haphazard consultation process for this strategy exemplifies all that is wrong in this area. At a minimum there needs to be: -
- A clearly stated and publicised policy on public consultations with explicit timelines for where and when things will be published, adequate response times etc.;
 - An understanding that resident groups and associations need to be contacted and advised that relevant consultations are taking place so that they can work with the City to ensure a real and effective response;
 - Publication of responses (and hopefully a realistic response from the City);
 - A change in attitude from City officers who sometimes seem to view consultation as some tick box exercise or onerous chore that they would rather do without;
 - A clearly stated and widely publicised policy on what working with residents and empowered communities actual means, how this will work, what it will look like and the role of resident associations and community groups in this process;
 - Continuity of these processes.

Allocations Policy

- 3.5. There is no longer any mention of the **Sons & Daughters** policy in allocations (i.e. additional points for the sons and daughters of existing long term tenants who live at home with their parents).

The Strategy outlines the difficulties of obtaining housing in inner London but then seems to obviate any responsibility on the City's behalf for helping those who have grown up in its own housing stock?

Residents have been told on numerous occasions that the City supported "Sons & Daughters" but it now appears to have disappeared by the backdoor? This is in spite of the fact that it has more recently been adopted by Boroughs across the political spectrum (e.g. by Sir Robin Wales, Mayor of Newham) on the grounds that: -

- It encourages stable and stronger communities;
 - It helps build better neighbourhoods;
 - It actively helps to fulfil statutory public duties to promote racial tolerance.
- 3.6. It is difficult to understand why those City workers earning £26,000 or less will be prioritised for housing. There are a number of objections to this: -
- The adoption of a fixed figure such as this betrays the mind-set of the public sector "salaried" who have a fixed and progressive wage structure – it is of little relevance to those in the real wage world of zero hours contracts, multiple jobs, periodic employment, self-employment, periodic unemployment etc. where income can fluctuate widely;
 - How will the City verify this figure without lawful access to wage records and how will they check on varying wages while someone is on the waiting list?;
 - Will people go on and off the priority list as their income changes?;
 - Will they be expected to re-apply at every change of income?;

- What will the cost to tenants and leaseholders be of enforcing such a policy in terms of increased staffing to be borne by the Housing Revenue Account etc.?
- It will encourage people to reduce their income for periods of time to ensure they gain priority;
- Due to the perversity of the Housing Benefit system someone who is working, in privately rented accommodation and claiming Housing Benefit may actually have a higher disposable income than someone in a similar situation earning a higher income but receiving no Housing Benefit;
- Over time it will lead to “low income ghettos” in the City’s social housing stock which will work against many of the other objectives around stronger communities and better neighbourhoods.

Better Homes, Stronger Communities & Supporting Disabled and Older Residents

3.7. Many Golden Lane tenants would strongly dispute the comment “*all of our homes have now been modernised*”. The Decent Homes Standard includes the responsibility for landlords to provide **a reasonable degree of thermal comfort**. The only practical way of doing this in Golden Lane is to tackle the life expired aluminium framed windows (containing thin 1950s glass) – 14 years after the Decent Homes Programme was launched nationally, and 4 years after it was supposed to be completed, work that would ensure the City complied with this requirement this has not even commenced on the priority block (Great Arthur House).

Unlike many other social housing landlords, there was no consultation on whether tenants wished to prioritise windows or kitchen and bathroom renewal – we were just presented with a *fait accompli* and told that for Golden Lane tenants it would be kitchen & bathrooms.

3.8. “*When I look at all the other estates around us, like the Peabodies and the Islington and Hackney estates I could weep! Look at everything they have acheived in the last few years, new windows, CHP heating, new cladding ... while poor old Golden Lane is falling to rack and ruin. It's kept clean but there is no real maintenance or renewal - just look at the place, the slabs, the panels, the freezing flats with damp. An absolute disgrace! Remember the Stock Options Appraisal? What a crock we were sold with that! Stick with the City they said, we have the money, we have the expertise - all that b*****ks they came out with. We would have been better off dumping them and going with someone else. They talk about asset management but it sounds hollow once you have seen what others can do*”.

3.9. Given that it was GLERA (Golden Lane estate Residents Association) that had to alert the City’s Housing department to the structural damage (both existing and potential) being caused by the use of salt as a de-icer on the Estate, and the huge potential cost to leaseholders and the City that this could entail, we would hope that asset management would include actively working with residents on this and other issues.

- 3.10. *"I find the way they talk about "our homes" in the document very interesting. I don't suppose any of those involved in writing it live on Golden Lane - I would have thought it is **their** "housing stock" but only "our homes" if you actually live in them! It shows quite a patronising and feudalistic attitude really – they seem to be saying that tenant or leaseholder they're not even our own homes, they belong to them and they just want to make sure you get the message".*
- 3.11. The terms "affordable housing" and "social housing" are used through the document, but are never fully explained. Golden Lane residents have found that there are multiple definitions of "affordable housing" dependent on who one speaks to (and few of them actually sound very "affordable" to many on the Estate). While this may be defined in some other strategy or planning documents produced by the City Of London, we believe that it would be useful to include a clear definition of both of these terms in this the "Housing Strategy" document, so that it is clear and transparent what the City Of London's interpretation of these terms are.
- 3.12. Part 2, Priority 1. The second strategic aim is "build more affordable housing on our estates". Whilst "affordable" (but **not** social) housing units have been built at Middlesex St Estate, we believe that on existing City Of London social housing estates that the aim should be to build more social housing (not the wider "affordable" housing definition). The building of "affordable" housing rather than social housing may promote more mixed tenure, but it clearly undermines the principle of social housing on which these Estates were originally conceived and built. As the City Of London has complete control (subject to Planning restrictions) over developments on its own Estates, and does not have to compromise with other third party developers in these cases, we can see no case for the City Of London not to restrict itself to building social housing units on the Estates. These are far more scarce than "affordable" housing – especially given the easier opportunity to require affordable housing units to be included by private developers of larger scale, market rent developments. The wording of this aim (use of "affordable" rather than "social") promotes confusion over the strategy's actual intention and feeds speculation that the City Of London does not intend to fulfil the provision of social rented housing.



- 3.13. Page 12 "Planning Policy - using our influence to shape supply", third paragraph... "Our requirement will be largely for social rented housing". This is a laudable aim. However there are no metrics on which to measure success. Also the "We will:" commitments that follow this paragraph make no reference to "social housing", but again only use the term "affordable housing". Residents believe the strategy should use more specific language in terms of the definition of the requirement for "largely" – is it "social" or is it "affordable". Outcomes also need to be specific, measurable and owned – otherwise this is just "fine words....."
- 3.14. *"Its "affordable" here, "social" there....do you think the people that wrote this even know the difference? Because I can tell them – "social" is something a Band 5 nurse at Barts can rent and "affordable" is something you need the £200,000 wage packet of the Town Clerk or the salary of the Director of Children & Community Services to be able to rent!"*
- 3.15. GLERA fully supports the ambition to support disabled and older residents to live independently in their existing homes. We would however point out that our **lived experience** as residents is rather patchy in this area. For example, there have been instances where the installation of external equipment to facilitate this has been a long and arduous process for the residents involved (especially leaseholders) with contradictory statements etc. and lengthy delays in approval. At a minimum there needs to be: -
- A clearly stated and publicised procedure for such adjustments;
 - Explicit timelines and responsibilities for when things should happen and who will be responsible.
- 3.16. Page 23-24 "Supporting Older People". One way of improving social cohesiveness, enhancing local communities and engaging residents is to support or implement schemes that encourage younger people to interact, spend time with, provide support and learn life skills, with and from older people. We believe that this is a useful mechanism to support older people and has the added benefit of engaging with the younger population as well. It would be encouraging if support for these types of engagement were explicitly listed and made part of the strategy.
- 3.17. Given the potential revival in "Right To Buy" sales encouraged by recent legislation, the City should review the terms of the leases sold to new leaseholders. Previous leases did not carry sufficient provision to prevent conditions that can undermine the community and the properties. Examples include: -
- Prevention of overcrowding in leaseholder property;
 - Length of sub-lets in leaseholder property (there is prior experience in Great Arthur of a property being used as a "holiday let");
 - Conversion of property to "homes in multi-occupation" (this already exists in at least one Golden Lane property, probably in breach of Fire

Regulations and potentially posing a risk to the safe egress of other residents in the event of fire).

Tenants raised these concerns in 2001 and 2003, following changes to leaseholder policy by other central London Boroughs. However this was not acted upon (ostensibly because there would be “so few future sales” [Pat Willey – Housing Department 2003]).

Policy on Children

3.18. Children are mentioned in the foreword but there are no policies to address specific issues relating to them. The facilities for children at Golden Lane have progressively declined with the loss of: -

- hard courts (originally used for children's football etc.) - to Fusion for commercial operation and private profit;
- clubrooms - to Fusion for commercial operation and private profit ;
- Youth Club - to Tudor Rose Court;
- Community Hall - (various children's' activities) now mainly private renting;
- Swimming Pool (including the Children's Swimming Club) - now Fusion for commercial operation and private profit;
- Playgroup/Nursery – closed;
- Ball area by Cuthbert Harrowing - closed;
- Paddling Pool - grassed over and used by general public;
- Basterfield Lawn – now wildflowers etc.

A new small ball games area has recently been provided. Fusion have organised successful children's activities but these are largely used by children from outside the Estate and require payment that can be outside the reach of tenants in particular. The Strategy should address the need to get children outdoors (from often small and crowded flats) and into society.

