

## Loss to the community

10 May 2002 | By Tristan McConnell

Elephant & Castle's £1.5bn regeneration is in tatters after local infighting caused the collapse of the scheme last month. And it is the people of the Elephant who stand to lose the most.

The ground-breaking Elephant & Castle regeneration project was shot down last month.

The council has lost credibility and the developer £5m, but what about the people of the Elephant? After four years of hoping, working and planning, the community has little to show for its efforts.

In March last year the Elephant Links Partnership Board, a coalition of community groups, was given third-developer status on the £1.5bn regeneration project. This was meant to be a new approach to consultation in urban regeneration that would see real community involvement alongside the London Borough of Southwark and Southwark Land Regeneration (SLR), the all-star consortium which includes [Frogmore](#) Estates and Godfrey Bradman, one of the people behind Broadgate in the City.

The project was intended to move ahead in partnership, with what the council described as genuine dialogue rather than the mere 'collection of consultation responses' before unilateral decision-making. It didn't happen. Instead, elements of the community have irreparably fallen out with the council, and splits have emerged in the community itself. Benefits the partnership process was intended to safeguard are nowhere to be seen, and while the council and developer grab the headlines the people have been left hanging.

All the bickering raises a bigger question: with their local politics and bitter personal rivalries, can communities ever be suitable partners in important development projects?

This point is as pertinent as ever. The government's Planning [Green](#) Paper enshrines the community's right to detailed consultation on all significant projects before they are submitted for planning permission. The lessons from the Elephant saga are instructive for all those involved in handling publicly owned property.

Richard Lee, director of the Community Forum, is an energetic representative of local interests. Despite his energy and optimism, even he has been disheartened by the process. 'We have programmes that are about preparing local people for the benefits that would come through the development,' he says. 'But now there are no opportunities for people to go into. Their hopes have been built up. It is an appalling way to treat local people.'

This disappointment is the only issue on which the Community Forum and the Heygate Tenants & Residents Association – representatives of the Elephant's Heygate Estate – agree. Heygate secretary Doreen Gee says: 'People on the estate are disappointed because we've been let down twice now in the last five years.'

The divisions run deep. Last autumn a rift between Heygate and the Community Forum culminated in Heygate unanimously voting to disaffiliate from the forum. This diminished the Community Forum's standing in the Elephant Links Partnership because it no longer represented the group most directly affected by the redevelopment.

Gee asserts: 'It is the Heygate Estate that is influential here because we are crucial to the whole development.'

Heygate's residents felt sidelined in the meetings. They believed the estate was not getting the attention it deserved: it was their members who would have to be rehoused when the estate was demolished and so suffer the most disruption. There were 26 open-space sites identified around the retained Elephant & Castle estates and Lee found himself caught between Heygate, which believed the priority was to find housing for its residents during the

redevelopment, and other Community Forum member groups, for whom the loss of their open space was too great a price.

In an attempt to maintain unity, the Community Forum refused to take sides, leaving Heygate feeling betrayed and marginalised. 'We were being told the retained estates were far more important than the Heygate,' Gee claims.

Lee argues that a compounding issue was the expansion and diversification of the Forum, which left Heygate residents unhappy at seeing 'the cake being shared out to a larger number of people'.

The wounds have not healed since last autumn. Lee accuses Heygate of doing a secret deal with the council earlier this year on the future of housing, but Gee rebuts this claim. 'To say that Heygate has agreed to a transfer to a registered social landlord is a lie,' she says. 'We will do what the majority wants. That is council tenancies, and to stay on the Heygate site.'

### **Racism accusations**

In the last few months a black residents splinter group from within the Heygate Estate has affiliated to the Community Forum. Lee says: 'The black tenants' group has criticised the Heygate association for being racist for doing nothing to represent the 40% black tenants on the estate.' Unsurprisingly, Gee denies this too, saying Heygate is a colour-blind group.

Lee believes Southwark council was involved in the split between the Community Forum and Heygate. 'It is a classic divide and rule by the council,' he claims. 'They aided and abetted Heygate. At the time disaffiliation was being considered, the council was giving huge encouragement about the resources [Heygate] would get if it left the Community Forum.'

'In terms of the council's narrow view it was thinking [the Heygate Estate] is our cash cow and if we can separate the Heygate group from the rest of the community maybe we can do business with the Heygate.'

Jon Abbot, project co-ordinator for the Elephant & Castle, denies the council played any role in the split and says it was 'disappointed' by the move.

The Development Executive Team was the vehicle for fully involving the people of Elephant & Castle in the regeneration, but since Heygate left the Community Forum, the DET manager – Lee, on secondment from the Community Forum two days a week – has found his job increasingly difficult. This culminated in the Community Forum being removed from its leading role at the DET, and a London Development Agency audit has been highly critical of the DET management.

The dispute between Southwark Council and the Community Forum centres on the DET and spells the end for any co-operation between the Community Forum and the council administration, following accusations of blackmail and threats of legal action. The forum ceased to be the employer for the permanent DET staff in early March and the DET's base was simultaneously moved out of the forum offices in the Elephant & Castle shopping centre. The council then demanded, by e-mail, that Lee hand over to it all DET files. Lee refused, arguing that the council was in breach of contract for ending the Community Forum's role as employer before the agreed term, at the end of March.

Lee believes the files are a community resource. 'How can we hand over the files to the council when a lot of the information is to support the community position in negotiations with the council?' he asks.

### **Money can't buy it**

Project co-ordinator Abbot sees things differently. He argues that the dispute is not a dispute at all but the Community Forum failing to comply with single regeneration budget rules to make information openly available.

The council has withheld payment of £15,000 owed to the Community Forum for consultants brought in to cover Lee's secondment and for agreed office costs while the DET was housed at the forum.

'We wrote to Southwark council accusing them of blackmail,' says Lee. 'They are trying to force us to do something

we don't want to do by withholding money that is due to us.'

The council then withheld the Community Forum's quarterly £32,000 grant, due at the beginning of April; again the forum was notified by e-mail. The forum was then forced to issue redundancy notices to its three permanent staff, including Richard Lee. Unless the dispute is resolved the staff will finish work on 16 May.

Elephant & Castle is a textbook example of how an urban environment can fail the people who live in it. The underpasses that weave beneath the vast interchange at the centre of the neighbourhood are still the domain of beggars and muggers, while drunks sleeping off their afternoon hangovers populate the open space beneath Rodney Gordon's psychedelic silver electricity substation. At the Heygate Estate on the New Kent Road residents have been waiting 25 years for a lick of paint.

This latest episode in the Elephant's tale offers little hope for its people. The Community Forum is hoping 'some new blood on the council side' following last week's local authority elections might enable the parties to work together again. But even if the Elephant Links Project Team is shaken up, Lee and his colleagues in the Community Forum feel that the council has treated the community appallingly. Lee claims the council has shown itself 'to be incapable of managing a large-scale development project'. This echoes documents seen by Property Week in which Godfrey Bradman tells the council: 'It is just not possible to do business with your authority.'

The government wants real community empowerment, but the prospects are not bright.

At the Elephant & Castle the community is no better off four years down the line and regeneration has been given a bad name.

## Unravelling the Elephant Links

**Elephant Links Partnership Board**  
Made up of local councillors, representatives from schools and businesses, Quality of Life & Environment members and the Community Forum, a cross-section of the local community

**Development Executive Team**  
A microcosm of the Partnership Board set up to represent it in tripartite meetings with the developer Southwark Land Regeneration and the London Borough of Southwark

**Community Forum**  
Representatives for 63 local groups

**Heygate Tenants & Residents Association**  
Representing those living on the Heygate Estate, due to be demolished under SLR's plans

**Elephant Links Project Team**  
The representatives of Southwark council in the development, made up of council officers

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