



Elephant and Castle: the SRB project was intended to transform the area into a thriving urban quarter, but in-fighting has stymied progress

Irreconcilable differences

NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL

The £1.5 billion scheme to revamp Elephant and Castle was intended to be a model of partnership working, but two years of internal wrangling resulted in an acrimonious split between developer, council and community. Nick Loney looks at what the future holds

Two years ago this month, the future looked bright for Elephant and Castle. A single regeneration budget (SRB) scheme had been established in the south London area nine months before. The board comprised around 20 partners, including local businesses, voluntary groups, the Employment Service, the Greater London Authority and South Bank University. Southwark Council, the accountable body for the SRB programme, had set up the Elephant Links Community Forum (ELCF), which represented the local community on the board and was intended to ensure as wide an input as possible in the regeneration of the area.

In June 2000, the council appointed Southwark Land Regeneration (SLR), a consortium of developers and architects, to take forward a massive £1.5 billion, 15-year regeneration project in the area. The scheme was intended to be a model of partnership working. The council and SLR formed a tripartite management structure with the Development Executive Team (DET), a collection of technical experts working on behalf of the community forum to represent and report back to the community.

It was hoped the development would eventually transform south central London into a thriving

urban quarter, bringing parks, squares, leisure facilities, shops and 3,500 new homes. Twenty four months later, this brave new world seems as far away as ever.

In April, SLR and Southwark Council parted company after failing to agree terms about the future course of the development (*Regeneration & Renewal*, 19 April, p8). A replacement developer is still being sought. Then, earlier this month, the council terminated its funding agreement with the ELCF following a four-month dispute (*Regeneration & Renewal*, 14 June, p6). The DET, which was intended to represent the community, is now in the hands of the council. The holy trinity of local authority, developer and community that was meant to represent the future of regeneration project management has separated, leaving behind bitterness, accusations and the threat of legal action.

At first, things went pretty well. "There was a lot of good practice in the beginning," says ELCF director Richard Lee. "It felt like there was proper negotiation with proper resources."

Lee believes that the problems began when the forum, spurred by its success in gaining strong independent representation in the development project, attempted to carve out a more autonomous role for the SRB programme. "The SRB programme was effectively run as if it was a council department," he says. "Most of the project team were recruited from within the council. This was a red rag to local residents, who believed the council was trying to dominate regeneration in the area."

Plans to turn the SRB partnership into a plc, away from council control, were passed unanimously at the partnership board's AGM in 2001. At the same meeting a vote was held on re-electing the board's chair, local resident Ann Keane. Richard Graham, a businessman, stood in opposition. The first two rounds of voting could not separate the candidates, so the contest went to a postal ballot. Graham won and Keane stepped down to become vice-chair.

Lee believes this change in personnel represented a decisive shift in power away from the local community. "Graham believed that the forum was too powerful," says Lee. "His first task was to bring in a team of solicitors to unravel the constitution voted on at the AGM."

Letters were sent to board members advising them against becoming a plc, a move Lee saw as "intimidation". Another vote was held at which the board decided not to press ahead with its original plans. "We felt betrayed. It was obvious all Graham wanted was to weed out the forum," says Lee.

Martin Smith, director of Elephant Links SRB, concedes that efforts were made to neutralise the power of the ELCF, but argues that this was necessary to make the board more democratic. "The board pursued the idea of becoming an incorporated body, but disagreed about its constitution," he says. "Previously, no decision could be made unless two members of the community forum were present. So if decisions went against them, they would just walk out. It was understandable that the council was reluctant to sign up to

a body in which one group held so much power."

The conflict over the constitution of the SRB programme was mirrored by the collapse of the development scheme. Unsurprisingly, there are differing accounts over what happened. Lee believes problems arose when the council reneged on a commitment to create a community land trust (CLT), a body that was to be led by SLR and would have control over both the housing and the land on the site. He says: "A CLT would mean there would be no money coming into the council coffers, so they got cold feet. They started secret talks with housing associations about the possibility of stock transfer."

According to Lee, it was the council's reluctance to cede control to SLR that killed off the development programme. But Chris Horn, director of regeneration and strategy at Southwark Council, denies this. "The Elephant Links project was never centred on the creation of a CLT," he argues. "It was just one of many options being considered. The community forum wanted a CLT, but you can't just get one by demanding it without justifying your case."

Horn says that the council and the developer split over insurmountable differences over the future direction of the project: "We just couldn't agree terms."

Already weakened by its failure to gain more independence for the SRB board, the community forum was fatally wounded in February this year when the DET – the technical team appointed to represent the community in the negotiations with the council and SLR – voted to break with the forum and come under council control.

In April the council suspended the funding of the ELCF after repeated requests to inspect the financial records of the DET project were allegedly turned down. Further negotiations resulted in an impasse, and a few weeks ago the funding agreement was terminated permanently.

The ELCF believes that the council's requests were unreasonable and maintains it is willing to allow access to the records as long as the dispute is managed by an independent mediator. Southwark maintains that the termination was a last resort following repeated attempts to block access.

A partnership board meeting on 24 June may yet iron out some of the conflicts, but ELCF is adamant that it will consider legal action if it does not. Meanwhile, the badly-needed regeneration of Elephant and Castle remains an idle fantasy.