

TEN GROUP

Summary of discussion at the meeting held in the Red House, Bexley,
27th September 2004

Present:

Peter Bishop, Director of Environment, LB Camden

Paul Evans, Strategic Director of Regeneration, LB Southwark

Chris Donovan, Assistant Director (Strategy, Planning and Regeneration), LB Bexley

Alison Dickens, Chief Executive, North London Partnership (for David Hennings)

Marc Dorfman, Director of Regeneration, LB Ealing

Apologies:

John Best, Chief Executive, Milton Keynes Council

Paul Clark, Chief Planning Officer, LB Redbridge

Phillip Goodwin, Director of Planning and Development, LB Croydon

David Hennings, Director of Strategic Planning, LB Haringey

The meeting was preceded by a tour of the Red House.

A **briefing pack** was circulated beforehand providing material to inform the future programme, including a section on issues, barriers to progress and recommendations from *Partners in Urban Renaissance*, and a paper reviewing reports and papers leading up to and including the Egan Review (2004).

The meeting began with a discussion of TEN's forthcoming programme, including meeting schedule and venues, proposed study tour, the development of the action learning programme, participation in the Sustainable Communities Summit, and fundraising. Minutes of this discussion are attached.

Chris Donovan, Assistant Director (Strategy, Planning and Regeneration), LB Bexley, made a **presentation** that introduced the **discussion session** on the theme of securing 'joined up working' as a means of raising performance. This is summarised below.

The next meeting of the Ten Group is proposed to take place in Croydon, hosted by Phillip Goodwin, on Monday 6th December.

Some of the issues facing places like Bexley can be followed up in our next meeting, and include:

- How do you 'reenvision' centres that were built in the 60s and are fast losing their appeal?
- How do you set up effective partnerships with the private sector that it may take years for results to materialise?
- How can you justify investment in improved transport when, as in the case of the Croydon tram, it does not seem to have increased property values?
- How do you monitor and assess the impact of major projects like the Tram?
- How far should the local authority be involved in leading or supporting major changes?

Securing 'joined up working' as a means of raising performance

Celebrate the ordinary The meeting took place in the Red House that Philip Webb built for William Morris. Whereas Bexley is in many ways a very ordinary London Borough, with large areas of semi-detached housing built between the Wars, it is making the most of its heritage, with 19 Conservation Areas. Its open spaces are part of a growing Green Chain. The opening up of the Red House, following its acquisition by The National Trust, is being linked to the promotion of other historic buildings, including nearby Danson House and Hall Place, and Bexley has secured considerable influence from a relatively small investment. Similarly the Borough's many town centres are at the heart of its 'area management' approach, and there is a Town Centres Manager and an assistant, reflecting the corporate approach.

People not structures Bexley has been practicing corporate management for several decades. Chris Donovan explained the original stimulus was the need to put the Council on a proper budget and performance management footing. Bexley does suffer from the lack of some grant aid, because its areas of need/deprivation are masked by Borough figures, as it does not have large areas of deprivation. Its successes are reflected in the Borough's skill in attracting whatever funding is going, for example £28 million for projects related to ODPM Sustainable Communities Fund in Thames Gateway, and recognition as a Beacon under a number of themes. Corporate management essentially seems to be about a way of working rather than formal structures, and hence is influenced by but not dependent on personalities.

Governance and leadership The Strategic Partnership, with its Joint Management Board, has close links with other agencies, such as health and police, which has increased its effectiveness. There is an ethos of joint project and multi agency working. Community Safety partnerships provide a good example, and for several decades there has been a good level of involvement from the private sector. Round table conferences happen every day.

Personal development not courses Considerable attention in Bexley was paid to personal development (which helps to explain the low rates of staff turnover, along with relatively affordable house prices). For example 100 staff have just gone through an Empowerment Programme, which has sought to remove some of the frustrations, such as who should sign letters. However the best form of team building is through running large projects. Project management is more about personal relationships than scheduling tasks, and in Bexley trust has been built up between professions, possibly through a non hierarchical management style. This has survived several changes in leadership.

Animateurs not bureaucrats In discussion the concepts of 'ready fire aim' and 'going for the hole' were raised. While structures can help, personalities are also important. Most organisations end up relying on a few people who can manage complex relationships. Partnerships may need to be 'culled' and continually reformed. The key to progress is forging a common agenda.

Responsive services It may be best to have tightly focused services that really meet people's basic concerns eg safe clean streets.. While good service delivery does not build trust by itself, without it there is no hope of securing acceptance of change. As most people are intrinsically conservative, a few people can block change (which limits the scope for community engagement in planning new development). Area management may be the best way forward in delivering services (and Peter Bishop highlighted the absurdity of treating council estates as if they were different worlds).

Strategies not stories Too many plans were simply long lists of what everyone is already doing, rather than representing a considered choice. A strategy should involve a reasoned choice, and so long as it can be explained and justified does not necessarily have to have everyone's support. Chris Donovan handed out a number of examples of recent work, including feedback on a development strategy for Erith Riverside. This showed how the Council has listened to reactions from the community, and had built up a consensus for change by making some modifications to the development brief, but also giving the reasons for sticking with higher density housing.

Unresolved issues A major barrier to resourcing services properly is the lack of respect for public goods in the UK compared with Continental Europe. (Also there is a mistaken belief in government that there is still considerable scope for increasing efficiency without any loss of quality.) This raises the issues of how you negotiate greater freedoms from Central Government, which is bound up with how local government raises finance.

Nicholas Falk
1 October 2004