

Estate ballots - are they working?

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- 1 COMMENT

The London Mayor's regeneration ballot policy made big promises to hand power to residents, but critics say the process has become a PR exercise. *Ella Jessel* reports

Sadiq Khan's [estate regeneration ballots](#) policy recently came under fire from the housing secretary, who said the 'onerous' measure was 'jeopardising housing delivery' in the capital. Robert Jenrick's broadside against London's Labour Mayor earlier this month signalled that the gloves had come off ahead of the (now postponed) mayoral election.

But where was the secretary of state's evidence for this attack? A quick glance at the estate ballot results so far shows no trail of stalled schemes. In fact, all of the ballots held in the capital since the policy was introduced in July 2018 have resulted in positive 'yes' votes for regeneration – and, in every case, for widescale demolition.

The GLA publishes data only on successful completed ballots, so it is difficult to know with absolute certainty how many estates are currently participating in a ballot.

The first under the new rules took place in November 2018 on the Westhorpe Gardens and Mills Grove Estate in Barnet, owned by housing association Metropolitan Thames Valley. There, 75 per cent of residents voted in favour of Pozzoni Architects' plans for the demolition and replacement of all existing 102 social rent homes, and construction of an additional 150 homes.

Since the Barnet vote, the AJ understands 13 more ballots have taken place. While confirming it had run them all, independent election body Civica said it could not provide information about where they had taken place 'without the permission of the investment partner' (each developer or council).

The AJ, however, has been able to locate all but one of the 14. The estates range from the 1,400-home South Kilburn Estate in Brent, worked on by Karakusevic Carson Architects (KCA), and One Housing's 24-home Bellamy Close and Byng Street scheme on the Isle of Dogs, worked on by HTA Design. Four more ballots have been announced.

Architects praise the way the 'trailblazing' ballot policy is driving up resident engagement. But, while councils use the results as a mandate for ploughing ahead with major projects, residents on some estates say the high voter turnouts and headline results mask a range of teething problems that need urgent attention.

Critics say the way ballots are working on the ground is a far cry from what they promised – that council tenants would be 'at the heart' of regeneration in the capital and handed a greater say in the future of their homes.

Issues include the amount of resources councils spend on campaigning (one council sandblasted 'VOTE YES' into its pavements) and uncertainty about who gets to vote. What is more, under the policy's rules, developers can dispense with the ballots if they forfeit public money. Architects have called on City Hall to close this loophole.

Architect's role

Under the GLA's rules, a ballot is triggered by any 'strategic' estate regeneration scheme seeking funding from City Hall. The small print explains this includes any project that involves the demolition of social homes and the construction of 150 or more homes (of any tenure).

Architects' involvement in ballots varies. Some simply produce early concept designs that form part of the documents residents vote on – known as 'the landlord offer'. Others are more active. PRP has been involved in five ballots: three completed, and two upcoming.

According to PRP director Brendan Kilpatrick, architects play a crucial role in the engagement process. They advise on the design aspects of the offer document, its presentation – and generally provide an 'elevated level of involvement' compared with an ordinary consultation. 'Architects' involvement is proportionately greater if the ballot is happening during the early design stage, as opposed to during RIBA Stage 2 or 3, when there's an enhanced consultation strategy in operation,' he says.

Levitt Bernstein director Irene Craik worked on Home Group's ballot for its regeneration of the Douglas Bader Park Estate in Barnet. Built in the 1970s, the estate was constructed with a Wimpey 'no-fines' concrete system (a lightweight mix made without sand or fine aggregate). The flats are undersized, poorly insulated, and suffer from problems caused by the construction method, including damp and condensation, according to Craik.

She says: 'We presented the developing scheme in several events, including a final formal exhibition after the residents had received their final offer and knew what size of home they were eligible for.'

Craik adds that the experience was not significantly different from a usual resident consultation, except that costings were developed to a more detailed level than usual, 'to ensure the offers made to residents could be delivered'.

Meanwhile, Karakusevic Carson Architects (KCA), which has also worked on the Achilles Street Estate ballot in Lewisham, says it is 'strongly committed' to the policy, which it describes as a 'trailblazing' for how it drives councils to engage with their residents and puts them at the centre of the design process. A KCA spokesperson says: 'It then leads to the council making a robust formal offer for both the quality and type of the new homes and provides clarity to all residents on rent levels and tenancy terms.'

Where they succeed, ballots clearly are driving up engagement and in general there have been some improvements in the type of schemes coming forward, with less 'mass demolition', according to Siân Berry, London Assembly member and co-leader of the Green Party.

Berry, who is working with residents on a number of estates to improve ballot processes, says at early stages the projects show 'better ideas' about phasing and timing the amount of demolition. 'Councils are modifying the overall structure of some schemes and there are genuine physical improvements,' she says.

PR exercise

ACHILLES STREET STOP and LISTEN!

There are too many unknowns,
Why we should Vote NO:

- No real details means No real guarantees
- The offer is not a legal document and is rushed
- Being 'promised' something by a council representative may not mean it will be delivered
- No guarantee of the new property sizes/type and what the development will look like
- We will be living on a building site for 8 years maybe more
- Our local Shops will be demolished & are excluded from the ballot vote;
- Lewisham have deliberately run down the area and mislead during this process
- Only 35% of the whole development will be homes for 'Social' rent
- 50% of homes will be for private market sale/rent - this will drive up all costs locally
- There is not an option for refurbishment on the ballot paper
- Lewisham have provided no independent consultation/advice (most councils do)
- This is Gentrification / Social cleansing
- Together we can demand Lewisham reinvest in our homes and community with good quality refurbishment, landscaping, play areas and community space.



ACHILLES!



VOTE NO

ACHILLES STREET
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TO DEMOLITION

If you have any questions please contact achillescommunity@gmail.com

Opponents of mandatory ballots in London had feared a ‘vocal minority’ of residents – or even non-residents – might sway the vote against development plans.

But, conversely, it appears it is investment partners who have been canvassing more loudly, seeking to ensure a ‘yes’ result with engagement campaigns, PR consultants and advertising.

On some estates it has given rise to claims of an unequal power dynamic. ‘Everything is set up in the council’s favour,’ says resident Jacqueline Utley, who opposed the regeneration of the Achilles Street Estate in New Cross, where she has lived for more than 30 years. She says that, in the months leading up to the ballot, Lewisham Council spent more than £31,000 on a PR company to talk to the estate. ‘Those residents who asked for options in the “offer” that didn’t include demolition were completely ignored,’ she claims.

She adds: ‘The whole process was just one big PR exercise designed to give the illusion that the regeneration ballots are democratic and consultative. If this disparity in spending was present in any other ballot involving public money, then there’d be a scandal.’

There are similar frustrations on Brent’s South Kilburn Estate which is midway through a huge regeneration programme due for completion in 2029. The council held a ballot in October for the ‘continuation’ of the project, but a group of residents was opposed to putting the entire 1,400-home estate under one ballot.

The group tried to mobilise a ‘no’ campaign. ‘We didn’t have a hope in hell,’ recalls Leslie Barson, who runs the Granville Community Kitchen on the estate. ‘The council had “VOTE YES” flags and banners, even had it sandblasted into the pavement. Every lift had two or three posters saying: “Vote yes and you get a new lovely home” or “Vote no and nothing will be done on the estate”.’ Barson says residents’ doors were knocked on three or four times, the council targeting households that had not yet voted.

Berry has called for action to be taken to ensure publicity for the ballots remains ‘neutral’. She says: ‘Councils should be publicising the vote, but being clearer that it’s a free choice and not be raising awareness for a “yes” vote. It’s not fair play.’

However, Brent’s regeneration chief, councillor Shama Tatler, says the council had run a ‘localised programme of engagement and publicity’ to support its position that the regeneration would make the estate ‘a better place to live’ and the community had voted overwhelmingly in favour of its plans.

She says: ‘These activities raised awareness of the chance to vote, gave residents opportunities to talk about their circumstances face-to-face and addressed myths, rumours and inaccuracies spread by a small group opposed to the regeneration.’

Karakusevic Carson Architects, which worked on the ballots at both South Kilburn and Achilles Street, says the council officers it encountered were ‘incredibly committed’ to ensuring residents got the best possible homes. ‘The process and guidance is relatively new and every estate and group of residents is different and the context and the design process highly nuanced,’ says a spokesperson for the practice.

They add that in both cases residents were 'at the forefront of their neighbourhood plans'.

Ballot avoidance

When ballots were introduced, Khan was accused of 'rushing through' funding agreements on 34 estates, involving demolition of 9,000 homes [and sidestepping public votes].

Berry has called for the ballot offer to be reopened to those residents if work has not started and for the mayor to take action against developers which evade ballots by not applying for GLA grants.

She is putting pressure on Westminster Council, which is currently progressing with Arup's plans to redevelop the 1930s Ebury Bridge Estate without applying for any funding from City Hall. Ironically, this scheme replaces an earlier, abandoned, scheme for the estate by HTA, which had residents' backing through a voluntary ballot.

Westminster is not the only council to have dispensed with a ballot in this way. Last May, Khan said he was 'disappointed' that Wandsworth Council had not bid for funding for regeneration of its York Road Estate and part of the Winstanley Estate and was concerned the council was 'avoiding my funding as they are unwilling to undertake a ballot'.

And questions have been raised over the lack of a ballot on Redrow's Hawkins\Brown-designed overhaul of Alton Estate in Roehampton, where demolition of the existing council homes has proved controversial.

Craik says Levitt Bernstein is not aware of this 'type of tactics' but adds that, if it is happening, the GLA should 'take steps to stop them'. Kilpatrick says one way around this would be to ballot all estates above a set number of homes.

'If the requirement for a ballot were applied by the London Mayor to a minimum number of affordable or socially rented homes on an estate, regardless of GLA funding (in the way there is a 35 per cent minimum requirement for affordable housing in developments across London) then this loophole would be closed,' he says. The GLA says there are no plans to review the policy.

Zero-sum choices

In addition to complaints over publicity, Utleigh also criticises Lewisham for framing the choice as 'demolition or nothing' on the Achilles Street Estate, despite the fact there had been repeated requests for infill and refurbishment options. 'Residents were faced with a zero-sum choice: vote yes, or continue living with the effects of poor upkeep and neglect.'

While more infill schemes are still taking place, refurbishment is harder to make viable in the current climate, says HTA director Simon Bayliss.

In the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, a number of estates were balloted as a way of establishing preferred options for stock transfers of council housing to housing associations. Back then, the transfer would open the door to refurbishment funding.

Today, this is less likely and the need to involve the private sector to cross-subsidise affordable housing has created a new dynamic. 'This makes refurbishment a much more difficult option to make viable and the increased density required can at times be at odds with some of the regeneration objectives or planning policies,' says Bayliss.

With so much riding on the ballot result, who gets to vote was always going to be a contentious issue.

Under the GLA's rules, social tenants, leaseholders or freeholders who have been living in their properties for at least one year can be balloted. However, temporary residents, increasingly housed on estates awaiting demolition as a stop-gap solution for desperate councils, cannot vote unless they have been on the local authority's housing register for one year.

This has led to tricky situations for schemes such as Studio Egret West's £1 billion High Road West regeneration for Lendlease, which hinges on a ballot for the Love Lane Estate in Tottenham. Of the estate's 297 homes, 170 are occupied by temporary residents, who might not have a say on whether their home is demolished.

Perhaps because of this, the ballot announced in September 2018 is still on hold. A residents' group has formed to campaign for permanent council tenancies for all temporary accommodation tenants.

Approaches to ballots vary from borough to borough. In June, Brent agreed changes to its housing allocations policy, deciding that temporary residents would be given secure tenancies on estates undergoing regeneration. But it later emerged that residents on the South Kilburn Estate were told this offer was dependent on residents voting 'yes' in the ballot.

Asked whether the London Mayor feels the ballot process could be improved, a GLA spokesperson says: 'The GLA maintains contact with providers conducting ballots and with Civica Election Services, who have conducted multiple ballots, so that it can understand any difficulties they face in implementing the ballot requirement and help them to address these.'

On the question of publicity, the GLA says ballots are run in line with Civica's rules. Civica referred the AJ to its guidelines, which make no mention of rules on campaign spending or advertising. With no plans for a review, such concerns are falling on deaf ears. Ballots were supposed to democratise development in London and tip the balance of control back in favour of residents.

But, in the rush to get the all-important 'yes' vote – and the funding that follows – there is a danger that councils and developers might lose sight of the bigger picture. As Berry says: 'The aim should not be to win the ballot, but to genuinely engage with residents.'