

ELEPHANT AND CASTLE

Heygate plan gets go ahead despite protests

By Emma Ailes

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THE MASTERPLAN for the demolition of the Heygate Estate and construction of 2,500 new homes was given planning permission after a six hour meeting on Tuesday.

Despite warnings from an independent valuer that the scheme was only financially viable with a level of 9.4 per cent affordable housing, developer Lend Lease said "it was committed to and would deliver" the 25 per cent it had promised.

Council leader Peter John and other members of the Labour administration cheered and applauded as committee members voted four against three in favour of the plans just after midnight.

The vote was split on party lines, with the four Labour councillors voting for the scheme. Two Lib Dems voted against, and one abstained.

Tensions flared at the historic meeting when dozens of people - including one of the four remaining residents of the existing Heygate Estate - were left standing outside in the foyer because the 100 seat room at the council's Tooley Street offices had reached capacity.

Police and private security were called in to guard the door, as accusations were levelled against the council that it was denying the public access to a public meeting.

Objectors silently holding protest posters later brought proceedings to a halt for half an hour as the council bouncers attempted to eject them from the room.

They were eventually allowed to stay after the head of Southwark Mediators, who happened to be at the meeting, stepped in to calm the dispute.

Detailed formal objections to the proposals from local people were heard over two hours.

Former Heygate resident Jerry Flynn, of campaign group Elephant Amenity Network, called on the committee to reject the plans until they met the criteria set out by the council's own policies.

"We all want to see more opportunity and benefit for all at the Elephant and Castle," he said.



Protestors at Tooley Street (above); and MP Hughes addressing them (top)

"But this application is weak on financial viability. It does not provide the 35 per cent of affordable housing required. There is a reduction of green spaces, and a reduction in community facilities. It is silent on how that viability gap will be bridged.

"More than 1,000 social rented stood on this site for more than 30 years. Only 71 new social rented homes are included in these plans."

"A key, maybe irreversible decision, will be taken this evening."

"I fear we are getting the worst of both worlds."

Residents of Wansley Street, whose houses will back onto the proposed new 'Walworth Square' also voiced concerns.

Adrian Glasspool, who still lives on the Heygate, spoke on behalf of leaseholders. "Over the last seven years I have sat and watched as my neighbours, and 3,000 other people, were systematically forced out of their homes. That was on the promise that this was going to provide 50 per cent affordable housing," he said.

But committee chair Cllr Nick Dolezal told members to focus on the application in front of them, rather than what had come before.

Representatives from Lend Lease, including Dan Labbad, global chief operating officer, who had flown in from Australia, were questioned on the plans.

Proposals for extensive car parking at what had been billed as a 'car free development', plans to provide play facilities for children over twelve "off-site", and proposed private management of parks drew particular scrutiny.

In response to questioning over the gap in financial viability - and why the gap could not be bridged to provide 35 per cent affordable housing - Mr Labbad said savings could be made through economies of scale, and because Lend Lease was prepared to take a risk.

"I assure you that Lend Lease has the experience, the global track record and the resources to deliver this important project," he told the room.

"Despite the challenging economic circumstances we find ourselves in, we have the financial capacity and stability to commit to this project for the longer term."

After the meeting, council leader Peter John told the *News*: "I'm delighted, this is a historic moment. It is a huge step on the road to delivering the vision for Elephant and Castle that Southwark Council has."

However, local MP Simon Hughes said: "It is really sad that the Heygate will not have the levels of affordable housing that are needed. I fear the council - and public - will come to regret this decision for a long time."



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