

Community Consent: How should Authorities approach a resident ballot for estate regeneration?

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Public Practice is a not-for-profit social enterprise with a mission to improve the quality and equality of everyday places by building the public sector's capacity for proactive planning.

10% of the year-long placements is dedicated to a Research & Development programme to share new knowledge and practice across authorities. This Practice Note is one of the outputs of this programme.

COMMUNITY CONSENT

How should Authorities approach a resident ballot for estate regeneration?

This Practice Note is based on research carried out as part of a year-long placement at Enfield Council. It explores the key considerations for Authorities when approaching a resident ballot for estate renewal projects. The research took place between April 2019 and March 2020 and was focused on London Boroughs, since the ballot requirement is currently only applicable to projects funded by the Greater London Authority (GLA). However, there may be learning from this document applicable to estate regeneration projects outside London.

This research was completed in January 2020, before the Covid-19 pandemic started to impact our way of life in the UK. The pandemic has had and will continue to have an impact on the way Authorities can engage with communities, and this is considered in the Next Steps section of the Practice Note.

CONTEXT

In July 2018, the GLA introduced a funding condition that requires Local Authorities and Housing Associations to undertake resident ballots for certain estate regeneration projects.¹ The resident ballot will apply if the projects involve demolition of homes (affordable, leasehold or freehold) on an existing social housing estate, and if there is construction of at least 150 new homes, regardless of tenure, within the boundaries of an existing social housing estate.²

The aim of the ballot is to put residents at the centre of decision-making processes and to ensure regeneration of London's housing estates happens with residents' support and engagement.³ According to the GLA website, there have been eight ballots with a positive result to date (this data does not list ballots with negative outcomes).⁴ It has now been 18 months since implementation of the ballot requirement, and now is therefore a good time to reflect on the ballots that have happened to date to understand how we can learn from these ballots for future estate regeneration projects.

¹ [GLA, Capital Funding Guide – Section 8, Resident Ballots for Estate Regeneration Projects, \(2018\), p.2](#)

² [GLA, Capital Funding Guide – Section 8, Resident Ballots for Estate Regeneration Projects, \(2018\), p.4](#)

³ [GLA, Estate Regeneration](#)

⁴ [GLA, Estate regeneration projects where residents voted in favour of regeneration, \(2020\)](#)



Estate Ballot Best Practice Round table event: July 2019, Achilles Street, Lewisham

APPROACH

There were three main approaches taken to gather research for this Practice Note:

1. Conversations with officers

The first stage of the research involved knowledge exchange with regeneration teams around London. A round table discussion was held in July 2019 with representatives from regeneration teams from five outer London Boroughs who were planning to undertake a resident ballot on estate regeneration projects. This provided an opportunity to meet, present and share ideas in an open environment and established a network of regeneration officers working on estate renewal projects. Work within existing networks included attending discussions held by London Council's Estate Regeneration Ballots Best Practice Sub-Group and speaking to officers at events run by the GLA, UDL and Public Practice.

2. Collation of information

Information was gathered on estate renewal projects which have achieved a positive ballot result. This included gathering resident offer documents, leaflets and exhibition boards from resident engagement events which are in the public domain or obtaining these directly from Authority Officers.

3. Survey

A survey was sent out to 25 Local Authority Regeneration teams across London, however only five responses were received (giving a response rate of 20%). The low response rate should be factored in when reading the findings and recommendations in this practice note.

FINDINGS

Although every estate renewal project has its own specific issues which are highly localised, there were common insights gained through the research for Authorities preparing for a resident ballot:

1. LACK OF INTERNAL RESOURCES

Authorities have in-house regeneration teams to facilitate the estate ballot process, but some authorities have expressed that a lack of internal resources is a key barrier to capacity in estate renewal projects. 80% of survey respondents confirmed they outsource work through consultants or agency staff to support and deliver estate renewal projects, and 20% of respondents said that lack of resource was the biggest barrier to delivering estate renewal in their Authority. In the survey responses received, the size of internal teams working on the estate ballot process varied from 2 FTE to 8 FTE roles, depending on the size of the estate.

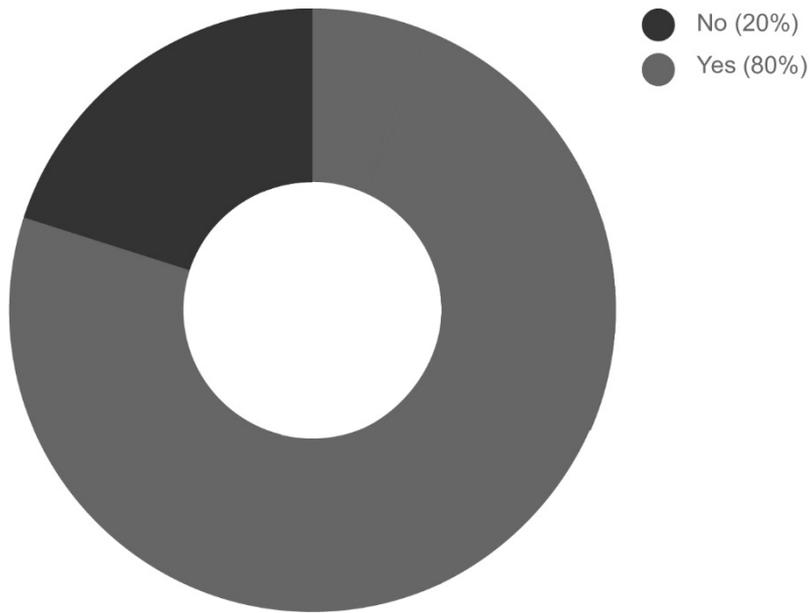
2. LACK OF CONSENSUS ON TIMING OF BALLOT

The general consensus is that the resident ballot should occur pre-planning, but there are varying approaches to when in the design process the ballot should take place, and to the financial expenditure Authorities are prepared to make pre-ballot. A key consideration is ensuring the funding principles and financing of the project are agreed prior to the resident ballot. There is a balance to be struck between the financial risk to the council of providing detailed design information pre-ballot, and the requirement to ensure the project financing is sufficiently robust to agree funding principles before making promises to the residents.

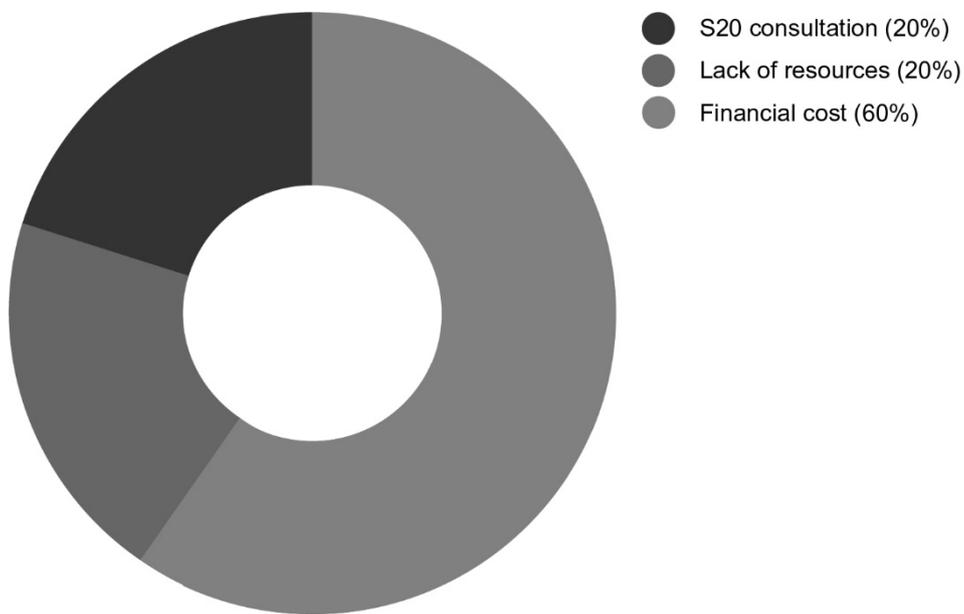
The level of design information provided in resident offer documents varies between Authorities. Increasingly ballots are happening at RIBA Stage 1-2 and in offer documents simple hand sketch visuals and typical layout plans are provided. In earlier ballots, full proposed GA plans and detailed layouts were included in the offer documents, but these projects were often already in progress when the ballot requirement was introduced by the GLA. Concerns have been raised from Authorities that it is not clear to what extent the GLA will accept adaptations to the design following the resident ballot. Some authorities who have provided more high-level design information in their Landlord Offer documents have provided guarantees to residents that they will be involved in the design process post-ballot. An example of this is at the Achilles Street Estate in Lewisham, where the residents will be involved in the selection of the architects to develop the design post-ballot.⁵

⁵ [Lewisham Homes, Residents on the Achilles Street Estate vote for new homes in Lewisham's first estate regeneration ballot. \(2019\)](#)

Do you outsource or use agency staff to support / deliver estate renewal?



Do you outsource or use agency staff to support / deliver estate renewal?



Survey findings showing a lack of in-house capacity for estate renewal projects.



Resident engagement event at the Joyce & Snells Estate, Enfield: January 2019

3. BROAD RANGE OF APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT

Resident engagement techniques used by Authorities include resident design workshops, establishing steering groups and community champions, door knocking, leafleting and holding large-scale resident engagement events. Authorities often have specific workshops targeted at certain groups, for example a leaseholders' forum or design workshops specifically for young people. A key challenge is how to engage with hard-to-reach groups, particularly the elderly and vulnerable tenants. Authorities are translating any leaflets or Resident Offer documents into multiple languages depending on the demographic analysis of the existing estate.

With regards to resident engagement on the design proposals, it is important that residents feel some authorship over the design. One consideration for Authorities when procuring their design teams is the resident engagement experience that the designers have. The extent to which the designers have been involved in the resident engagement pre-ballot varies between Authorities, but any designer working on the project will need to demonstrate that residents' ideas are being responded to throughout the process. A key lesson learnt from Authorities who have been through the ballot is to be open and honest with the residents.⁶ It is important not to raise unrealistic expectations, but to be clear where residents can have agency in the process.

It is important that an Independent Tenant and Leasehold Advisor (ITLA) is appointed to provide independent and impartial advice to residents on proposals, enabling them to play an informed role in the process.

⁶ [LocalGov. Best practice in resident ballots. \(2019\)](#)

4. AUTHORITIES ARE OUTSOURCING ENGAGEMENT

Due to a lack of internal resources, external facilitators have been brought in by some Authorities to manage the resident engagement process. Online tools are also being utilised by some Authorities to help facilitate community engagement, for example Bang the Table⁷ or Built ID.⁸ These tools can help Authorities reach a wider audience so that more people can have their say on the design proposals.

5. AUTHORITIES ARE OUT-SOURCING COMMUNICATIONS

Utilising an external communication consultant can allow Authorities to be more creative with the project branding, rather than relying on the council corporate brand. However, this needs to be balanced, as some branding from external agencies can in turn appear too 'slick' and therefore out of touch with residents. Some Authorities have hired internal social media and communication officers dedicated to the estate regeneration project to work within the team, rather than rely on external PR consultants. Each Authority needs to consider the appropriate approach based on their in-house capacity.

6. LACK OF CONSENSUS ON CAMPAIGNING FOR 'YES' VOTE

There are no rules that the Authority cannot campaign, and some Authorities have led very active campaigns, including YouTube videos, street art and banners around the estate to encourage residents to vote 'yes'. However, there has been some criticism from residents about the amount of resources councils are spending to get a 'yes' vote, and whether this creates an unequal power dynamic.⁹

7. RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT WITH LANDLORD OFFER VARIES

Some authorities are co-creating the Landlord Offer document with the residents, whilst other Authorities are preparing the offer document and then consulting with residents on the offer after it has been approved internally. It is important to set out the length of time that the Landlord Offer will be out for consultation with the residents at the beginning of the process, as this will determine the ballot date. The GLA guidance states there must be an 'appropriate amount of time' between the Landlord Offer and the resident ballot, which provides some flexibility to Authorities.

⁷ bangthetable.com/

⁸ built-id.com/

⁹ [Architects Journal, Estate Ballots: Are they working? \(March, 2020\)](#)

8. AUTHORITIES CONCERNED WITH MATCHING HOUSING ASSOCIATION OFFERS

Authorities are concerned that differences between Landlord Offers from Housing Associates and the Authority's offer may lead to some resident discontent, especially with regard to leaseholder shared equity offers. It is important that Authorities communicate openly with the residents on the constraints of the Landlord Offer and the core drivers for the Authority, which will generally be to build more affordable housing for the Borough.

9. RANGE OF OPTIONS FOR CASTING VOTES

All ballots which have happened to date have used Civica Election Services as the Independent Body to manage the democratic process. The ballot process itself should run for at least 21 days to maximise voter turnout. Ballots done to date have been undertaken by voting online, postal vote or telephone vote. A key consideration is whether to have a physical ballot box on the estate or not. The physical ballot box has to be manned, and sometimes this is housed in a van, as it must be located somewhere 'neutral' (not in the vicinity of any publicity encouraging a vote either way).¹⁰ As the ballot period lasts at least 21 days, it can be difficult to coordinate the ballot box, with some Authorities concerned that if the box is only available on certain days this may cause confusion among residents on when or how they can vote.

¹⁰ GLA, Capital Funding Guide – Section 8, Resident Ballots for Estate Regeneration Projects, (2018), p.9

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ANALYSE THE CONTEXT OF THE EXISTING ESTATE

The starting point for planning a resident ballot must be a thorough analysis of the context of the existing estate. There is not a 'one size fits all' approach to the resident ballot process, and all estate renewal projects are unique. There are a variety of factors that will impact on the approach to the resident ballot, including local community drivers and interest, tenure mix of the estate, local politics, physical condition of the estate, existing social issues, estate history, local demographics and culture. The template for how a ballot is managed on one estate renewal project may not work for the next project.

2. BE FLEXIBLE WITH THE BALLOT DATE

There needs to be flexibility around the ballot date. When planning the resident ballot process, it is important to develop a project plan with clear milestones. The programme should demonstrate which milestones have fixed time-periods associated with them, for example the length of time the Landlord Offer should be published before the ballot takes place. It is important politically not to establish a fixed ballot start date at the beginning of the process, but instead to let the programme determine the ballot date when the key milestones have been achieved.

3. CONSIDER THE DESIGN TEAM'S EXPERIENCE OF RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

Authorities should ensure that procurement takes into consideration the design team's experience of resident engagement. Resident engagement is essential to achieving a positive ballot outcome, and it is important that the design teams procured have experience of working with residents. This requires soft skills of listening and communicating clearly, as well as being willing to co-design proposals with residents and manage expectations throughout the process.

4. ESTABLISH A CLEAR LANDLORD OFFER

Establishing a clear Landlord Offer and being able to effectively communicate this to residents is key to coordinating the resident ballot process. When preparing the Landlord Offer, Authorities must consider social tenants, resident and non-resident leaseholders, those in private-rental accommodation and those in temporary accommodation on the estate. A key element of the Landlord Offer will be the decant and phasing, particularly whether residents will be required to move more than once, be guaranteed a new property on the estate and the timeline for the decant of each block on the estate. It is important that the Landlord Offer is clearly communicated to residents and accessible to everyone on the estate.

5. ESTABLISH ELIGIBILITY TO VOTE

Authorities must allow time to establish who on the estate is eligible to vote. Authorities can refer to the GLA guidelines on voter eligibility,¹¹ and must allow time to create a register of those living on the estate that are eligible, cross-referenced with the housing register. To avoid any confusion, Authorities are addressing ballot papers to all eligible individuals, rather than to the household or occupiers. The physical extent of an existing social housing estate is not always clear, so it is important to agree the red line boundary with the GLA at any early stage in the process and communicate this to the residents.

6. HAVE AN ENGAGEMENT PLAN IN PLACE

There should be an engagement plan in place following-on from the ballot, and this should be communicated in the Landlord Offer. A positive vote is just the beginning of the resident engagement process. Explaining the post-ballot process clearly to residents helps to build trust that the ballot is not the end of their engagement in the regeneration of their estate. Some Authorities have displayed 'thank you for voting yes' banners around the estate following a positive ballot result to demonstrate to the community they are grateful for the vote of confidence, and that they wish to continue working with the community moving forward on the project.

7. MAINTAIN CONSISTENCY IN INTERNAL TEAMS

Consistency in internal teams is recommended to ensure lessons learnt are carried forward. Following their first resident ballot on an estate regeneration project, Authorities will have a team who have been through the process and who have learnt lessons to take forward to the next project. Moving this team onto the next estate regeneration project that requires a ballot will help improve the process for the Authority and for the residents.

8. CONTINUE SHARING IDEAS ACROSS AUTHORITIES

Continued sharing of ideas across Authorities will help improve the process for residents and officers. Open communication between Authorities and sharing of lessons learnt following resident ballots will help future estate regeneration projects. Site visits to other Authorities who have completed a ballot can help with sharing ideas, as this is still a relatively new process for officers involved. Early and continued dialogue with the GLA will also assist in resolving any uncertainty regarding the ballot requirements.

¹¹ [GLA, Capital Funding Guide – Section 8, Resident Ballots for Estate Regeneration Projects, \(2018\), p.6](#)

NEXT STEPS

This Practice Note has explored the key considerations for Authorities when approaching a resident ballot for estate regeneration projects. To take these initial findings further, there are a number of areas of research that would benefit from further development. They include:

— RESIDENT BALLOT TOOLKIT

The results from the survey showed that Authorities would value a more comprehensive Toolkit on how to approach the estate ballot process (100 % of respondents said they do not have a toolkit on the ballot process at the moment, and 80% of respondents said they thought this would be useful). Starting from the considerations in this practice note, a Toolkit could be developed for Authorities to use when approaching the resident ballot process. Authorities have suggested a checklist of tasks to be completed before preparation of the Landlord Offer Document would be very useful, especially for Authorities who are approaching the ballot for the first time.

— RESIDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

This Practice Note is written from the perspective of an Authority officer but is missing the resident voice. An important study would be to interview residents who have been through the resident ballot process to understand how we can learn from their experiences. There is a question as to how we measure the success of a ballot, and whether this is just related to the percentage of positive votes against voter turnout, or if there should be a more nuanced view of success that takes into account the residents' experience of the process.

— WIDER COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Another aspect not considered in this Practice Note is the wider community, other than the residents of the estate, and how it is included in the engagement process. The ballot is focused on the residents of the estate, but Authorities need to consider how plans impact on local businesses and other local stakeholders.

— RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT POST-BALLOT

A further study could be completed reviewing the schemes that have had a positive ballot, and how the resident' engagement maintains momentum whilst the design develops further and the project starts on site.

— COVID-19

Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the resident ballot process. Many resident ballots have been put on hold during the UK lockdown whilst Authorities and residents focus on dealing with the health crisis. As we come out of the lockdown, we will need to discover new ways of engaging effectively with communities.

In May 2020, Public Practice held an event to discuss engagement at distance, and it was highlighted that we cannot rely solely on digital engagement due to levels of digital illiteracy within communities.¹² A further study could be completed to map the innovative techniques being used to engage with residents during social distance restrictions, and to review the challenges facing Local Authority regeneration teams preparing for a ballot during this time.

¹² [Public Practice, Resources: Engagement at Distance, \(2020\)](#)

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IMAGE CREDITS

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The implementation of a resident ballot requirement by the Greater London Authority for council estate regeneration projects aimed to put residents at the centre of decision-making processes. With eight ballots having taken place so far across the capital, the ambition is to ensure regeneration of London's housing estates happens with residents' support and engagement.

This research into the ballots that have taken place so far reveals a number of variations in the nature and timing of the processes, with the potential for differing degrees of success in terms of meaningful resident engagement.

Drawing on research carried out during a year-long placement in the London Borough of Enfield, this Practice Note explores the key considerations for Authorities when approaching a resident ballot and makes a number of recommendations for continued research in order to establish a best practice process for resident ballots for estate renewal.

#Design, #CapacityBuilding, #Council-ledHousing,
#ResidentBallots

Practice Notes and other resources are available to download at www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources