

28 Mar 2023

Culture and Environment Scrutiny Committee Mon 3 April at 6 pm.

Deputation from Tom Young

We - the public - are asked to accept on trust that the sale of the two NW5 depots to a single "visionary" developer (possibly British Land) is consistent with KT Planning Framework. It's stated as such several times in Cllr Beales's November report to Cabinet.

We know the costly retrofit of the Holmes Rd depot has gone ahead while Cllr Beales has been the cabinet member for regeneration and after the formal adoption of the KT Framework in 2020. The Framework area includes the depot.

The Framework demands

"Proposals should demonstrate innovative and flexible approaches to building design, enabling future adaptability with the very highest sustainability credentials"

The depot's demolition would be a terrible beginning to the process of realising the goal of sustainable development through the KT Framework.

Negotiations between Beales and the so-called visionary developer poised to buy the Holmes Rd and Regis Rd depots might be expected to rule out demolition if sustainability was a genuine concern. But, Beales hasn't given any assurances on this score.

Cllr Beales's advocacy of comprehensive development at Regis Rd, borrowed from the Framework document, imposes hefty costs on a developer. Para 2.4 of last November's cabinet report lays out the challenge

"Regeneration could be achieved potentially through a conditional land sale agreement, where the Council's land is disposed of to a private sector developer to take on the planning and development risks. Sitting alongside disposal, the Council could also agree to use its land powers – compulsory purchase and land appropriation, and potentially acquisitions by agreement if necessary – with costs covered by the developer to enable a comprehensive approach to be delivered in the longer term"

This is an extraordinary strategy and all of it flows from the initial sale of the Holmes Rd and Regis Rd depots. The developer is apparently expected to bring forward a single planning application for the whole Regis Rd area (plus the Holmes Rd depot) after covering all Camden's compulsory purchase and land appropriation costs. Wow! What sort of bargaining position does that give the developer?

The idea that Camden can reach a mutually advantageous agreement with a developer obliged to do all this heavy-lifting which also protects the public interest invites scepticism. I hope you are sceptical. The KT Framework document is absolutely no assurance in this regard, and it's vital you recognise that.

Beales wants us to believe its narrative of neighbourhood improvement will survive contact with reality - which in this case is a deal with a developer who is expected to fund the buy out of all the other 9 or so existing property owners, a vastly expensive undertaking already aggravated by hope-value caused by the Framework itself. The same developer is expected to liaise with all the landowners and prepare a masterplan and submit a single planning application. Obviously, the planning process will be hopelessly compromised by the demands and requirements of the developer or as Beales himself said in an interview with a property magazine a couple of years ago: "communities will be pragmatic about trade-offs, as long as they are involved". I don't trust this notion of pragmatism at all. Far more of this has to be in the open.

We see in the inevitable demolition of the Holmes Rd depot that sustainability is already a casualty of Camden's deal-making. I ask you to recognise that the KT Framework does not protect the public interest.

It is vital, in light of that realisation, that Camden now changes tack. It must lead a new process at Regis Rd by drafting its own plan for the urbanisation of the site - its own masterplan. It must be a hard-edged urban plan, fully-quantified and evidence-based, and used as the firm basis for any deal. Only Camden can protect the public interest in the situation we now face. Camden has to take responsibility by driving matters forward itself.