

Dear Councillor Huynh,

## **Local Assemblies and Community Empowerment**

Since their establishment in 2007:

*“The role of Assemblies, as outlined in the Commission, was that they should be a “Vehicle for local empowerment, establishing a structured environment in each ward that will support an ongoing process for identifying and resourcing local concerns and implement local solutions”.*

It is deeply regrettable that Lewisham Council finds itself unable to continue to support in any way the one borough wide programme that has done so much to bring people and their communities together over the years since it was first introduced. Here in Lee Green we have found that the ability to make ward-wide contacts with people and groups has been of enormous benefit for the area. Over the years we have been able to speak, as a local group, directly with many officers and democratically elected members of the council, the local police and representatives of organisations with development plans in our ward. We have been able to see development plans amended both before and after they went to Lewisham’s Planning Committee and to make representations regarding local effects of planning applications. We have listened to sponsors for local projects for the benefit of all kinds of areas of interest, for young people, for jobs, for continuing to have free local libraries, for providing community spaces, for helping people learn skills and crafts, to come for advice and be helped with problems from form filling to housing and homelessness, This work still goes on thanks to charitable funding that was levered in, though the future is now very uncertain. Available funds were discussed and disbursement decided on by agreement to encourage such local activities. We even sponsored and wrote a very local ‘Local Plan’ for our area.

Out of Assembly meetings’ priorities a working group was established to look in detail at the Leegate plans first with St Modwen and now with Galliards and were able to see changes for local benefit written in to the eventual agreement with the current developer. Benefits that accrued include a community centre and medical facility written in to the Section 106 agreement for Leegate. In another task set by Lee Green Assembly the parking investigation built up a body of research into other boroughs that helped with Lewisham’s own parking plans.

As you mention in your letter, it is always a stretch to be able to include all the very varied kinds of people and their communities in empowerment or even consultation or community development work. By their very nature, different approaches work with different communities. At its most basic, meetings at different times of day will suit people with different lives and venues are not always suitable or accessible for all. Many approaches were used with the Lee Green Assembly including varied venues, evenings, afternoons and weekends, offering facilities for the whole family and different ways of finding out people’s views and needs. And the help from Lewisham’s Assembly support officers was invaluable in this.

However, all of the approaches were just that, all approaches from top-down. In Lee Green, as a result of being able to come together, a Consortium of local groups has spontaneously come together and will continue, we hope, following the extinction of the support so very

helpfully offered by the Assembly secretariat. I would like to make the proposal that this 'Consortium' model could be adopted in other areas if it has not already happened. An element of support from the Council's Culture and Community section would give enormous impetus to our own Consortium not least in enabling knowledge of any new initiatives or opportunities in the community sector and could help in leveraging funding where it often is so urgently required. Members of our groups are all volunteers and seeking out information that may help their work puts an enormous strain on such human resources.

***Full disclosure:*** *I speak as an ordinary local resident who has attended the Assemblies, as a founder member of Lee Green Lives and as a member of the Leegate Development Working Group established early on by the Lee Green Assembly, responsible to and reporting back to that body. In addition I have been since 1973 a qualified professional Community Worker and spent some time developing methods of community engagement in Lewisham, Greenwich, Tower Hamlets, Islington and other boroughs including in the establishment of Phoenix Community Housing in Bellingham and Downham. Key to the operation of Phoenix is its radical empowerment of its tenants as owners of the Association.*

It is my hope that you will find my informed comments helpful. While appreciating the pressure on the council's resources, I believe that at least some support for voluntary efforts not only manages to be inclusive and empowering but gives back to local needs by its grassroots agency.

#### **Group members of the Lee Green Consortium:**

Friends of Manor House Gardens

Lee Green Lives (LGL)

Lee Manor Society

Arts Network

Friends and Users of Staplehurst Shops (FUSS)

GRACE (Greenwich Refugee Aid & Community Enterprise) Charity Shop

Lee Fair Share Time Bank

Lee Forum Lee

Green Open Studios Lee

Green Women's Institute

Leegate Traders Forum

Lochaber Hall Association

Manor House Library

Manor Park Friends

Newstead Tenants and Residents Association

Soul Refresh Café, Leegate Street Wildlife Action Group (SWAG)

Users and Friends of Manor House Library