

MALLETT

BeFirst evolves into its next stage

Being bold and getting the basics right demonstrates what can be achieved in getting the planning function working, says Lee Mallett

BeFirst has launched 'phase two', an evolution in its approach focused on new partnerships to tackle the scale of ambition in Barking & Dagenham, reports Lee Mallett

Be First, Barking & Dagenham Council's regeneration arm, relaunched itself in February this year, which it described as 'evolving into its next stage' and has adopted 'a new business model that prioritises public-private partnerships'.

Local authority regeneration companies have been established before but none are quite like BeFirst. Notably LB Tower Hamlets' regeneration company Poplar HARCA was created in 1998. This focused mainly on the renewal of its parent authority's ageing but considerable housing portfolio in Poplar. Be First was always a uniquely broader local authority-owned subsidiary in terms of what it was set up to do.

Its remit includes regeneration, economic development, commercial development, asset management, grant funding, estate decants, project delivery, building control, infrastructure, transport and policy, planning and design consultancy, design and sustainability, planning development management. This includes providing private planning consultancy services to clients outside the borough – earning money in other words.

Pretty much everything in fact to do with the built environment, but what raised eyebrows back in 2017, was the devolution of planning control to a separate company also in charge of economic regeneration and development. Wasn't that like a fox being in charge of chickens?

This doesn't seem to have been a problem in the subsequent eight years. BeFirst has assimilated some of the business acumen of the private sector and accommodate it within the ethos of the public sector – which is how it describes its modus operandi on the BeFirst website.

BeFirst has also won several awards along the way, for developments like Industria, the sustainable multi-story workspace scheme, being ranked joint first in the Planning Performance Tables for on-time major and non-major decisions by the former DLUHC (the Council's statutory development management services having previously been at risk of 'special measures' prior to the establishment of

BeFirst), while Caroline Harper herself won the RTPI's Inspirational Leader of the Year Award, when she was deputy MD for BeFirst in 2023.

That joint first position has been maintained for four years. And in that time a new Local Plan has been produced and adopted in 2024. Since 2017/28 planning permission has been granted for 28,000 homes in the borough. A substantial contribution to London and national housing targets, and making the borough one of the largest affordable housing developers in the UK.

The new incarnation moves BeFirst away from the Council directly delivering development to focus on establishing public-public and public-private partnerships, using the Council's assets (which are considerable in portfolio terms across a range of uses) to facilitate growth.

Other changes include a slimmed down board and greater Council involvement and the appointment of Carline Harper as Interim Managing Director, replacing Geoff Raw, who took over from his predecessor Pat Hayes. Jeremy Grint is the new chair, having been chair of the Council's housing management company, Reside and director of regeneration and economic development. Caroline Harper joined BeFirst (from private property consultant JLL) soon after its formation in 2017.

What is noticeable about the underpinnings of



ABOVE:: Caroline Harper, Be First's interim managing director

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BeFirst's performance is 'attitude' – towards the role of planning in the development process. There is a desire to bring some 'joy' to the process of planning, rather than it be regarded as a barrier. Planning is regarded as a tool to delivery that supports good development and prevents bad. And because in that process many things are negotiable, this puts power into planners' hands, rather than following the letter of policy. The commitment is to producing places that really work seems to underpin what BeFirst seeks to achieve.

Then there is the unique circumstance of statutory planning being delivered by a council-owned subsidiary company. This has meant that officers are exposed to colleagues who have had experience in the private sector, possibly working on projects outside the borough, which creates a slightly different perspective. Being more conscious, for example of the cost of the process to an applicant, or the implications of design issues on cost and programme, providing of course that working practices and priorities are appropriate and observed in the statutory process.

There has also been a renewal of the 'back-up systems' that support the work of planning officers. These had not been renewed for around 20 years. This was instrumental in achieving a corporate cultural shift that enhanced accountability and avoided double handling of data, making information available off-site, and rationalising case information into a single version of the facts. There was also a new focus on customer experience ensuring officers were contactable, with more digital information being made available to applicants and the establishment of a clear process for development management work, supported by the new office systems.

All these factors enabled the development management function to up its game and to get rid of



any backlog in applications and put a system in place for engagement with councillors and to work ahead. The appointment of new (and some younger) people and a focus on a team approach, with newcomers moving between departments to gain broader experience, has also helped transform performance and resources were also put in place resource to oversee the production of the new Local Plan.

The scale of the opportunity to deliver growth within the borough means Barking & Dagenham is a key element in delivering what the GLA and what Government policy wishes to see in terms of delivering 1.5m new homes within this Government's term, and on the Mayor of London's Growth Plan. Four of London's 15 key industrial sites are located in the borough and two of its key housing delivery sites. London Riverside has scope for example for 39,000 homes.

This scale of opportunity can't be delivered by BeFirst alone, hence the new emphasis on securing partnerships in BeFirst Phase2, working with investors and developers alongside the GLA and government.

The original model relied on development finance provided by the Council, but this no longer worked at the scale now envisaged to achieve the Barking & Dagenham 2040 vision. So no resting on laurels and the Local Plan will have to flex with what happens next.

In particular BeFirst hopes to unlock partnerships with more 'patient capital' sources focused on long term projects, which means the statutory planning function will have to offer as much confidence as it can to attract those partners. This also requires the borough's political leadership to reaffirm that it is 'pro-growth' and as a Labour borough it is obviously aligned with the current Mayor and with national Government.

In terms of the proposed changes to statutory planning in the Planning & Infrastructure Bill, BeFirst is already ahead of the game. Training with members of planning committees is already in place with a thorough members' briefing system.

It is the attitude however of being bold and getting the basics right that has already demonstrated

ABOVE: Be First last year launched an investor video seeking partners to invest in The Factory District, based around Thames Road, Barking which will deliver 1300 homes in a co-living business and residential district, and includes the multi-level light industrial Industria scheme. BeFirst has identified around 400ha of potential development land for future industrial and resident expansion.

what can be achieved in getting the planning function working – which is helped considerably by the physical circumstances of the borough which is still tackling a decades-long post-industrial condition.

The scale of Barking & Dagenham's opportunities means it is at the heart of what happens next for London, and the engine driving that must be a successful and capable statutory planning function. BeFirst's example holds lessons for local authorities and planning departments everywhere. ■