

The Arches, Childers Street Local Meeting notes

Held at Festa sul Prato between 18:30 and 20:00 on Thursday 9th August 2018.

Apologies: Deptford Folk, Chair of the Evelyn Parents Forum and 12 local residents

Councillor James Walsh chaired the meeting and outlined what would take place during it, and noted that the applicant is here voluntary.

Officers gave a background of the site and outlined the current proposals, stating that the only issue for debate was surrounding the marketing of the units.

The floor was then opened to questions.

Councillor Silvana Kelleher: The background of the units was discussed and questioned whether the marketing undertaken reflected the demography of the area. She also asked the applicant what could have been done differently to reach local communities.

Simon Fowler (planning agent): He stated that boards had been displayed from the start of the Kalmars marketing process, potential occupiers were able to make contact with Kalmars, but no formal offers were received. He asserted that Kalmars were a reputable local business. This was considered to be in compliance with Council policies.

Paul Hensher (applicant): He provided an outline of his business (City Business Centre) and said that they rent out and refurbish office space; they are not a residential developer. Examples of where local units are occupied were provided. He entered into a lease on the units at Childers Street four years after they were built. They were marketed individually and together locally and on the internet. He also outlined why they were not occupied.

Councillor Silvana Kelleher: She recognised that they hadn't been bought to have been left empty, but raised the point of why they weren't let out to local community uses, which is a missed opportunity.

Paul Hensher: He stated that there was a need for a financial return. However, no interest had been forthcoming from community groups, even though such groups had been involved with other units pertaining to his company.

Local resident: He questioned the need for a local meeting and the lack of an agenda. He stated that the location of the meeting was not suitable and the inability for it to be staged within the units proved that they haven't been maintained to a good standard.

Officers: The need for a meeting is laid out in the Statement of Community Involvement.

Councillor James Walsh: The location in a neutral venue would be better for all parties, which was supported by Councillor Silvana Kelleher.

Councillor Alex Feis-Bryce: He stated that the maintenance of the units was pretty poor and the local businesses have tried to get in touch to rent with units without any response. The cost per m² is higher than the average in the local area and that cost in the marketing report does not tally with websites.

Paul Hensher: His company have a long lease on the ground floor. Housing for Women manage the units and the building, and the applicant has campaigned for rubbish to be cleared away and the associated area tidied. The bin stores pertain to the residential units on upper floors. 15ft² is the average rent on Childers Street. The applicant's company would refurbish the unit to the occupiers' requirements before occupation. He reiterated that he hasn't heard from local businesses recently, only receiving an enquiry to Kalmars in December 2014. There are no active enquiries.

Councillor James Walsh: Asked if a Section 215 notice could be considered.

Officers responded that this is an issue for Environmental Health / Clean Streets who have more powers in this area, and it is unlikely to be expedient to issue one for planning enforcement officers.

Councillor Alex Feis-Bryce: He asserted that the condition of the units impacts on the viability of the units, which was supported by a local resident.

Officers stated that it was not uncommon for empty units to appear in disrepair over time and that there is limited incentive to maintain their appearance as it is costly to do so.

Local resident: There is rubbish in one unit, a smashed window in another and an attempted break in. He rejects the previous point.

Councillor James Walsh: He brings it back on point and talks about the shell and core condition. Units like these are usually refitted to the needs of the occupier. However, he recognised that the conditions of the units affect property values, which is an important point and could be a line of enquiry at planning committee.

Paul Hensher: Shell and core is standard within the industry.

Local resident: He mentions Vive Living on the same street and other local businesses inhabiting units and questions why the application units can't be let out.

Paul Hensher: The long lease doesn't allow other uses and other types of uses would require planning permission for change of use, which is off-putting to them. Therefore, it only makes sense to market for B1(a) uses. Having checked for updates on the day of the local meeting, no enquires for offices had been received to the continuing advertisement.

Local resident: He asserts that this must be down to the quality of the building.

Councillor James Walsh: He questions whether the external appearance of the units is affecting marketing and occupiers wanting to move in.

Paul Hensher: Changes to the frontage require planning permission and the quality of the external part of the units is similar to Marine Wharf, which are occupied.

Councillor Silvana Kelleher: She queried whether local community groups could use the units as office space. Officers confirmed this. She also asked whether the applicant was open to those groups getting in touch.

Paul Hensher: Yes, but charities for example aren't likely to move in. Charities have moved into other units owned by the applicant and these have been occupied on market rents.

Councillor Silvana Kelleher: Could the units be changed to a flexible use? For example, A1, A3, D1.

Councillor James Walsh and Officers reminded her that it would be up to the applicant to make this application and we have to consider the current application.

Officers also clarified what the Planning Inspectorate have to consider for the current appeal and why they are involved.

Councillor Alex Feis-Bryce: He questioned why various reports weren't made public. What did the Flood Risk Assessment say?

Simon Fowler: The Flood Risk Assessment stated that the proposed development is acceptable and that further information has been provided to the satisfaction of the Environment Agency.

Local resident: He shows photos of an incomplete A board and a smashed window and questions the use of the units for residential given their condition and safety concerns.

Councillor James Walsh: He asks the applicant if he intends to rent or sell the dwellings.

Paul Hensher: He states that he has not decided yet.

Councillor Brenda Dacres: She asked who marketed the units and queried the instructions given. Something seemed to be lacking given that these units are not occupied.

Paul Hensher: He repeated the points about his company and the marketing reports, including mentioning an updated marketing letter from Kalmars.

Councillor Silvana Kelleher: She confirms that boards are visible in all the units, although some have fallen over.

Local resident: He questions the use of Kalmars, the market rent and the length of the marketing.

Councillor James Walsh: He reminded everyone that the applicant has to run a business and earn return on his investment.

Paul Hensher: He stated that the company and its owner, Richard Kalmars, are well-established and have been involved with the Southwark Chambers of Commerce, where the units have also been advertised. Most enquiries come from the internet through market brokers. Kalmars have a lot of clients, which was detailed in paragraph 8.6 of the report (which he read out).

Local resident: She questioned whether cross-marketing had been carried out; had the applicant or Kalmars offered these units to potentially interested parties within other units.

Paul Hensher: Businesses are not choosing to be in Childers Street, but he confirmed that cross-marketing had been carried out.

Local resident: He stated that Evelyn Court on Grinstead Road is also far from train stations yet is occupied. He questioned how important the location actually was.

Paul Hensher: There is an issue with free on-street car parking spaces on Childers Street, which might become a Controlled Parking Zone in the future. Occupiers tend to look for allocated car parking spaces as they will definitely be available.

Councillor Brenda Dacres: She felt as though the applicant hadn't gone the extra mile to market these units, rather just used standard methods used on other sites. This is a unique site requiring a different approach. She questioned whether this is a good area and whether the condition of the units affected potential future occupiers, which is a marketing issue.

Local resident: He questioned whether the 15ft² was per month or per year and when it was reduced from 20ft². He also wanted to know how long it was marketed at those prices, although they did not seem to tally with what he found on the internet.

Paul Hensher: People do not look in local papers to find office space. He does do special offers like a three month free period as an incentive. He would also fit out the unit for free once an occupier is found. The unit was marketed more than once in the Southwark Chambers of Commerce magazine without any interest or officers being received.

Local resident: He stated that the prices online were misleading as the market rent came out at 70ft² depending on the size of the unit in question. This was not clarified before the Panel.

Paul Hensher: He clarified that the total amount is what could be quoted and it is reduced depending on how many unit one company takes. The units are listed as 15ft² on his company's website. They do not directly advertise on Zoopla; the units are promoted by internet brokers.

Councillor Silvana Kelleher: She asserted that the price was meaningless as there was no interest. She queried what the cost actually meant in real financial terms.

Paul Hensher: It would cost £20,000 for 13,000ft, which would be enough office space for 15-20 people.

Councillor Alex Feis-Bryce: He touched on maintenance, which is one of the limitations of the report. He was not sure why people did not express interest in the units.

Paul Hensher: He stated that people who want to fill offices won't be walking by them on Childers Street.

Councillor James Walsh ended the meeting.