

A Proposed Redevelopment Project on the Camley Street/Cedar Way Industrial Estate: the Story so Far

The place

The Camley Street/Cedar Way industrial estate and the adjoining streets of houses and flats known as Elm Village are in the London Borough of Camden, just north of Kings Cross and St Pancras stations. The industrial estate and the houses and flats were built in the 1980s.

The problem

The businesses on the estate, which currently employ some 500 people, are on short-term rolling leases to Camden Council, which owns the freehold of the site. They face a risk to their continuing operations, in that the Council is currently refusing to renew the leases on a longer-term basis. This suggests that the Council is considering doing something different on the site. It is carrying out a review of its options, although the review is currently delayed. The options involve various forms of partnership with private developers. There is a possibility, therefore, depending on the Council's eventual decision, that the businesses would be required to seek accommodation elsewhere, that the vacated industrial units would then be demolished, and the site used for purely residential purposes. Given a private developer's overriding concern to make a profit from its investment, it is likely that most of the residential units would be for sale at market rates.

Under most of the options being considered by the Council, the residents of Elm Village opposite the estate would have very limited influence on the outcome, despite that outcome having a profound effect on their future lives.

A neighbourhood plan and an alternative proposal

The Camley Street Neighbourhood Forum was designated by Camden Council in February 2013, following the Localism Act 2011. The Forum has since formed a Community Land Trust, now constituted as a limited company: Camley Street Sustainability Zone. The Forum is in the process of developing the Camley Street Neighbourhood Development Plan. A significant part of the Plan concerns an alternative proposal for the redevelopment of the industrial estate.

The Zone and the Trust have brought together a group consisting of directors of several of the businesses on the estate (who very much wish to stay there), residents of Elm Village opposite, architects, planning consultants, lawyers and potential funders. The group's alternative proposal for the redevelopment of the estate would provide about 700 genuinely affordable new rented homes there. It would decant the businesses, one by one, from their existing accommodation to new units on the site. It would increase to approximately 1,000 the jobs on the estate, by providing opportunities for the existing businesses to expand and by inviting new businesses to establish themselves there.

Camden Council would retain the freehold of the land. The Trust would take a 99-year lease on it; Camden would receive an income from that lease, which in total value would be equivalent to the Council selling the land today to a developer for £95 million. This arrangement would ensure a continuing long-term contribution to the Council's coffers. The scheme would also quickly yield to the Council a healthy stream of business rates and council tax.

This proposal is supported financially by large institutions which have an interest in modest but absolutely reliable returns over the long term, rather than the quick profit demanded by conventional developers. Architects Karakusevic Carson, who have long and successful experience of working with London boroughs on projects of this kind, have prepared detailed plans for the site.

The politics

The decision as to whether or not the proposal becomes a reality lies with Camden's officers and councillors. Unfortunately, while the Council's review of its options is delayed, the Zone and the Trust are not permitted to approach the Council to press the case for the alternative proposal nor, by negotiation, to modify its terms.

Conventional developers, with an eye to a quick profit based on sales to that minority of people who can afford to buy new property in London, have built, are building or are planning expensive new homes in Camley Street and nearby. 'Affordable homes', conventionally defined, are beyond the means of most Londoners.

It may well be that Camden Council, facing the financial challenges which it does, is attracted (like councils up and down the country) by the large one-off cash sums offered by private developers in one of the partnership options it is considering. Nonetheless, the principles embodied in the alternative proposal outlined here – financially sound, environmentally friendly, socially inclusive and architecturally pleasing – help to address the chronic shortage of genuinely affordable housing in the borough, while maintaining and increasing employment on the Camley Street/Cedar Way estate. If the Council were to complete its review and then approve the proposal, work could start on site within two years, with initial completions two years after that.

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Further updates will appear on this site and on the Camley Street Neighbourhood Forum website – <http://camleystreet.org.uk/> – as the story develops.