

**From:** Lewin, Paul  
**Sent:** Aug 24, 2022 at 7:53 AM  
**To:**  
**Subject:** RE: STRA

Dear

Yes, it was good to see you and the executive at the meeting, along with the helpful discussion. I've split the e-mail up into sections to address the matters you raise.

#### Background

As Gerry and I indicated at the meeting, the work that STRA has done in getting an adopted neighbourhood plan is a significant achievement. It required a substantial and sustained amount of community resource. Few London boroughs have active forums that have got to that stage. In addition we agreed STRA has done much good in terms of practical work, such as supporting public realm enhancements to the town centre. The Council (officers and local councillors) supported and worked closely with STRA to enable the neighbourhood plan and relationships were good within the first and early second term of the forum. As with all forums, the Council's approach is to seek to offer a 'light touch' in terms of oversight and involvement. The statutory requirements of a forum are few, and there is little national guidance on how forums should operate. This gives the potential for considerable latitude reflecting the likely wide range of local circumstances across the country. Given the success of the Forum in its first phase the Council had no concerns with approving the Forum's application for renewal which met the statutory tests. It was clear that there was widespread community support for the Forum.

In late 2018/ early 2019 however, officers were made aware of a number of a number of issues with the forum. This included:

1. the significant change to STRA's constitution away from that which was approved by the Council as part of the forum's designation;
2. removal of an executive member in a manner not consistent with the constitution;
3. local councillors indicating they were not informed of meetings or forum business as much as other forum members;
4. concerns from local residents (including existing at that time and former executive members) about how inclusive the organisation was; and
5. a lack of clarity about what was forum as opposed to residents' association business.

When confirmation on the constitution issue was sought by me in early 2019, STRA immediately reverted back to the Council approved constitution. Council officers (including me) had previously attended numerous STRA meetings. In light of concerns raised, to gauge how the forum was working I sought to attend the AGM in May 2019. However, along with councillors present and some members of the local community I was initially prevented entry to the meeting. After prolonged discussion which included STRA's legal representative who was also present, I and some of the councillors were allowed entry, whilst some of the other councillors and residents had left. Given the role of local planning authorities in assessing a forum's status, the denial of access of the Council's officers and councillors to the AGM was a significant concern and inappropriate. It indicated an organisation that wasn't comfortable with scrutiny and didn't allow the Council to perform its role in assessing whether STRA was meeting statutory requirements associated with its forum status. At the meeting, it was clear that relationships between some of the executive and its former members was fractious. It is our experience that this is not necessarily unusual in local residents' meetings. Whilst sometimes this can be personality driven, some of the frustration appeared to be around decision making being taken by individuals rather than the executive as a whole. The process for a decision such as to expel a member of the executive for example is clearly set out in STRA's constitution and it is not clear that this was followed in relation to the person that was expelled.

To seek to address the above matters, officers, some local residents, local councillors, Renu and from the STRA executive and STRA's legal representatives attended a constructive meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2019. At the meeting a draft memorandum of understanding (MOU) was circulated drafted by STRA's legal

representatives with input from the Council (attached). A number of actions were set out as a result of the meeting. (attached as part of minutes). This included all reviewing and proposing changes by the 16<sup>th</sup> August 2019. Although the meeting was positive, Renu indicated that STRA's executive would need to consider the MOU and meeting outcomes before STRA could commit to any response. To facilitate this, I also met you and other executive members on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2019. We had a useful meeting and it was agreed to set up a meeting between the Executive and the three Sudbury ward councillors so that you could work through their concerns. This was eventually programmed for 11<sup>th</sup> February 2020. Due to the lack of availability of Cllr Mary Daly, STRA cancelled the meeting and then the pandemic intervened. There has been no follow up from STRA in terms of response to the MOU issued at the 2<sup>nd</sup> August meeting.

## Current Issues

Despite the passage of time, the current issues with the Forum from an officer perspective are considered essentially to be the same as was highlighted three years ago. These need to be addressed sufficiently prior to STRA's likely application in December to renew the forum's status for another 5 years. Gerry and I attended the 2022 AGM which included the elections to the Executive. The meeting was well attended, with a good range of local issues addressed, including guest speakers and was cordial. Nevertheless, it was noticeable that local residents who had raised issues (such as those at 2<sup>nd</sup> August) meeting were not present. You may wish to get in touch with those people, former executive members and former and existing councillors to understand from their experience how they consider engagement/ decision making can be improved in the future and this is reflected in the way STRA operates.

As identified at our meeting, there needs to be clarity on what is STRA business as a residents' association and that which is Forum business and also which area applies to which. STRA has indicated on numerous occasions that it draws its membership from, and the area it represents is the former (pre 2022) Sudbury ward boundary. This has been reflected for example in STRA's requests for notification of planning applications as per the relevant regulations consistent with the forum's status but that this should apply for the wider Sudbury ward. The Sudbury ward is more extensive than the statutorily recognised neighbourhood boundary for the forum (see attached map with old ward boundary in red). The neighbourhood boundary also stretched into the former Northwick Park ward. Forums can include members from outside their areas. Nevertheless, voting rights on certain matters require either the person to be residing in the area, or operating business premises within it. As such, there is the question of whether when addressing forum matters, if it is appropriate for all STRA members to be able to vote. At the very least there should be an understanding/record of who outside the forum area is voting.

A recurring theme that all of the local councillors prior to 2022 brought up on numerous occasions was the fact that they were either not notified or meetings, or notified at very short notice. It is a statutory requirement that at least one local councillor of the minimum 21 members can, if they wish to do so, participate as members of a forum. From the Council's perspective, given the membership size of STRA, there is no reason to limit the number of councillors if they wish to be members and they should be offered the opportunity. If they request to be members, the forum must ensure that they are treated the same as other members. Following the most recent Council elections, the forum area now includes three wards. These with their associated councillors are: Sudbury  
- [Cllr.Teo.Benea@brent.gov.uk](mailto:Cllr.Teo.Benea@brent.gov.uk) [Cllr.Paul.Lorber@brent.gov.uk](mailto:Cllr.Paul.Lorber@brent.gov.uk) Northwick Park  
- [Cllr.Narinder.Bajwa@brent.gov.uk](mailto:Cllr.Narinder.Bajwa@brent.gov.uk) [Cllr.Diana.Collymore@brent.gov.uk](mailto:Cllr.Diana.Collymore@brent.gov.uk) and Wembley  
Central [Cllr.Rajan.Seelan@brent.gov.uk](mailto:Cllr.Rajan.Seelan@brent.gov.uk) [Cllr.sonia.shah@brent.gov.uk](mailto:Cllr.sonia.shah@brent.gov.uk) [cllr.ketan.sheth@brent.gov.uk](mailto:cllr.ketan.sheth@brent.gov.uk) We urge you to get in touch with the councillors to see if they wish to be members. In addition to this, you need to understand that officers should be able to attend any of the wider forum meetings if they indicate a desire to do so and we would encourage you to make us aware of any meetings proposed well in advance.

It wasn't something that officers picked up at the time of granting forum status, but on reflection the Council is uncomfortable with a minimum necessary contribution per household to become members. We would prefer this to be voluntary so that it does not unintentionally restrict membership. We understand that STRA has overheads as a forum which need to be recouped. There are opportunities, for example through Council funding streams to support the administrative costs to supplement such donations.

## Expectations

When reapplying for forum status we expect some evidence of progress on the above matters and this to be reflected in the necessary supporting material to meet the tests that the Council has to consider when deciding whether to grant forum status. We know that STRA has many more members than the minimum statutory requirement of 21. This is very positive. We will however need to be convinced that the total membership is spatially well distributed and reflective of the demographic of the area applied for and that there are no significant omissions from either, or that best attempts have been at least made to seek representation from these people, even if they have not decided to become members.

We understand that within local communities and democratic organisations people will for whatever reason not always get along and there will be disagreements. However, the Council does want to ensure an environment within the forum where even if there are disagreements/ issues with personalities, that people do not feel that they are explicitly or implicitly being made to feel uncomfortable or excluded from actively contributing to the forum's business.

#### Next steps

From our perspective, as indicated we feel STRA has done much good work. We want it to continue as a forum. We would be happy to work through any draft information that you may wish to submit in advance of your formal application for the forum's status to be reviewed, taking into account the above matters summarised in the following actions:

In summary it is recommended that you take the following actions:

1. Review the distribution of membership to see that it corresponds with the neighbourhood area and that there are no significant gaps within.
2. Undertake equalities monitoring to see that the membership is truly inclusive and representative
3. Refresh the publicity so that everyone with a business or home in the area is aware of the forum and can join
4. Look at methods of fundraising so that membership is not dependent on a fee or subscription
5. Demonstrate how the organisation acts in an apolitical way and methods used to ensure that
6. Set out how conflict resolution will take place where members are in dispute over contentious issues.
7. Show that the neighbourhood forum is distinct from any role as a residents' group
8. Consider whether there is an intention to proceed with the use of any planning powers if Neighbourhood Forum status is reconfirmed
9. Contact ward councillors to invite them to attend meetings.
10. Set out a schedule of meetings and a work programme and publish this on the website.
11. Refresh and keep the website up to date on the meetings that have happened since the AGM in 2018 and provide the minutes of those meetings to be in the public domain.

I hope that this of use to you and STRA in clarifying our position.

Regards

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