

Victoria Quarter planning victory a marker for other developments

Robin Bishop writes:

A Planning Inspector has dismissed Citystyle Fairview's appeal against Barnet Council's refusal of 539 flats on the former gasworks site, Victoria Quarter. It's a considerable achievement for New Barnet Community Association and its supporters, with important implications for other big developments in our neighbourhood.

John Dix of NBCA commented:

"We are pleased with the Planning Inspector's sensible and considered decision and hope that the developers will now actively engage with the community to develop a scheme which in more in keeping with the area and exemplifies good design. It should not be forgotten that if the developer had progressed the scheme approved in 2017, 371 homes would now be providing good quality accommodation for local families."

In 2020 Fairview applied for permission for 652 units in blocks up to 10 storeys high. Following local outcry and planning refusal, they returned with a reduced scheme for 539 units in 13 blocks. There were 800 objections from members of the public.

In March, the Council rejected that proposal by 9 votes to 1 (with 1 abstention), chiefly on the grounds that it would be harmful to the character and appearance of the area including the adjoining Victoria Recreation Ground.

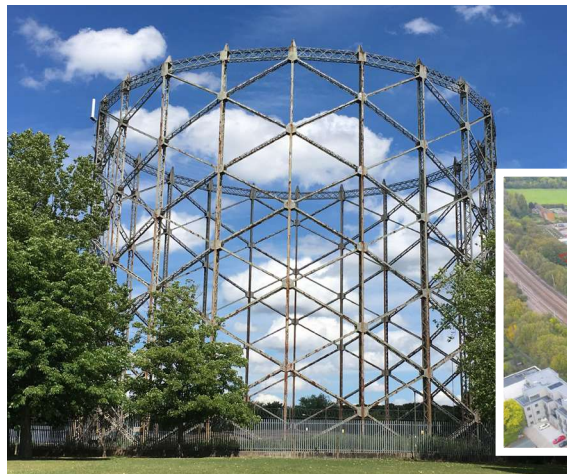
The Barnet Society objected to both applications. Although we've long supported housing on the site, we argued (among other points) that the mix should include many more family homes, preferably with gardens.

The two weeks of the Public Inquiry were intense and demanding for NBCA, who had opted to be a 'Rule 6 party'. That required John Dix, Fiona Henderson and Karen Miller not only to do a huge amount of preparation, but on almost every day of the Inquiry they had to make detailed statements about social and technical aspects of the proposals, grill Fairview's expert consultants and endure hours of torrid cross-examination by Fairview's QC.

On Day 3, the Inspector invited comments from other interested parties. Powerful statements were made by Councillors Phillip Cohen, Edith David and Simon Radford plus Colin Bull of Cockfosters Local Area Residents Association (CLARA) – which has successfully resisted high-rise development of their tube station car park. And on Day 6, Theresa Villiers MP also spoke passionately against the proposal.

The Barnet Society had already submitted a detailed representation, but I took the opportunity to emphasize a couple of key points.

First, back in 2010 we'd been impressed by the Council's exemplary New Barnet Town Centre Framework, which was based



The landmark gasometer in New Barnet, which, separately, owner National Grid wants to develop. (Below) an aerial view of the site



on local consultation and set out a clear direction for development of the former gasworks site. Out of that had grown the mixed housing proposal that was granted planning approval in 2017, in which NBCA had been proactive.

I also made the point that, as a former architect and RIBA Client Design Adviser, I acknowledged that what was acceptable in 2017 might need updating in the light of technical and other developments. However, the latest scheme was a generic international modernist solution that had nothing in common with New Barnet's character. It was a design approach that had been discredited when I was an architectural student over half a century ago, and New Barnet deserved better.

The Inspector's verdict was clear: "Overall, I consider that the sheer scale of the proposed development would cause a dislocation within the area, inserting an alien typology of larger mass and scale and disrupting any sense of continuity between the areas to the west and east of the site.

"To my mind the existence of the taller buildings in the town centre cannot be seen as a compelling precedent for such an intrusion. These latter buildings are only on one side of the road and there is a considerably greater distance between them and the four storey buildings opposite."

He also considered aspects of living conditions such as sunlight, daylight, noise, overheating, playspace, parking and refuse, and concluded, "Whilst none of the above issues are necessarily fatal to the scheme in isolation, taken together they do not indicate to me that the scheme can be considered to be of good design."

East Barnet ward Councillor Simon Radford said: "I am delighted that the Fairview appeal has been rejected. This is vindication for our campaign against tower block blight and overdevelopment. The Save New Barnet campaign have been steadfast in pointing out the various flaws of the scheme, and I was delighted to join them, along with my colleagues Cllr Cohen and Cllr David, in sharing our thoughts with the Planning Inspector about the potential for flats to overheat, the poor design of the development more generally, and concerns about how affordable these flats would really be. Today is a good day for East Barnet!"