



The Barnet Society

Campaigning for a better Barnet

NEWSLETTER

November 2011



St John the Baptist Churchyard and the High Street

CHAIR'S LETTER

The Government launched its draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in the summer and set off a chain reaction of protest. Organisations not normally known for their radical approach, such as the National Trust and CPRE, became highly agitated and vocal, appearing on radio and tv to explain their concerns. The Daily Telegraph began its 'Hands off our Land' campaign and even the Women's Institute joined in by urging its members to write to their MPs. Not since the Government's earlier plans to sell off our national forests have the reasonable people of England become so agitated.

The draft framework attempts to make our over-complex planning system easier to use. Everyone agrees this is necessary and long overdue. But the proposed document, replacing a huge number of documents with one, is full of well-intentioned, but over-simplistic policy which possibly lays our towns and countryside open to development that many of us would find unacceptable. The proposal means that many of the safeguards that are currently in place to protect our urban and rural environments could be removed. At the heart of the document is a 'presumption in favour of sustainable development', but without defining what that means, the nation's planning consultants and lawyers will have a field day. Developers will be hiring them to show just how sustainable their developments are even when, in many cases, they won't be. The proposal that Local Authorities should generally allow development where there is no Local Plan in place (assuming it complies with the NPPF) is, frankly, scary and must be changed. Many LAs are still struggling to produce their Local Development Frameworks (LDFs), years after they were introduced, which means they do not have the requisite Local Plan in place. And the proposal to replace the plethora of existing documents with this much shorter document will, no doubt, shortly be followed by the publication of a whole series of new documents and guides, as Local Authorities and Planning Inspectors grapple with interpretation of the wild generalities of this proposal.

The Government sees a revised planning system as the key to economic growth and assumes that the current complexity is the reason that more houses have not been built over the last few years. This is too simplistic. There are many reasons for the slowdown in house-building, not least the ever-rising property values (in the south-east, at least) and the difficulty in obtaining mortgages. Many of the major developers/house builders already have planning consent for 1000's of new homes, but are not building them in the current economic climate. It is not the planning system that is stopping them..

The NPPF assumes that local communities will have a much greater say in the new planning system, through the introduction of the Localism Bill. Whilst we

would probably all agree this is a good thing in principle, nothing has yet been said about how this will be achieved. The Barnet Society has already stated its intention of working with our local community to establish a Neighbourhood Planning Forum here in Chipping Barnet, but how will this be resourced? No one seems to know. Unless local people with planning and/or architectural backgrounds are prepared to spend vast amounts of time devoting themselves to the cause, little will be achieved. This is what Local Authority Planning Departments are for - to consult with us and to work on our behalf to develop local plans that will deliver the kind of development we want to see. We have already shown that we are capable of engaging in the process of local planning, via the stalled Town Centre Strategy Board, but we still need professional help to produce documentation that will be capable of standing up to the scrutiny of developers' lawyers and Planning Inspectors.

The Barnet Society wrote to the Department of Communities & Local Government to express our concerns over the NPPF. We reproduce our letter below and would welcome your comments. There has been such a national outcry about the document that we presume (and hope) it will be heavily amended before becoming national policy (although planning inspectors are already citing it at appeals). We will watch and wait and report back in future newsletters.

You will see from our letter that there is a section in the NPPF on Green Belts, which we generally welcome. However, we are concerned about the possible erosion of parts of the Green Belt when they are considered to be of lesser quality and the potential impact of the new Community Right to Build. Later in the Newsletter you will find a piece on a current planning application for redevelopment of Barnet Countryside Centre, which will encroach a short way into the Green Belt. It already has outline planning consent and the principle is therefore established, but this submission under reserved matters pushes further into the protected land. Although it is a good scheme and we generally support it, we must uphold protection of the Green Belt which, of course, was the reason The Barnet Society was founded in the first place.

You will all be aware by now, I'm sure, that Chipping Barnet was awarded an Outer London Fund grant of over £416,000 a few months ago. Gail Laser, our Vice Chair, is chairing the High Barnet Town Team, comprising members of Barnet Traders Association and other local Residents Associations, and is working with Barnet Council to organise the various activities and initiatives that make up the successful bid. She has written a piece below about these and we urge you all to attend as many of the up and coming events as possible. Design work is well underway for improvements to the churchyard fronting

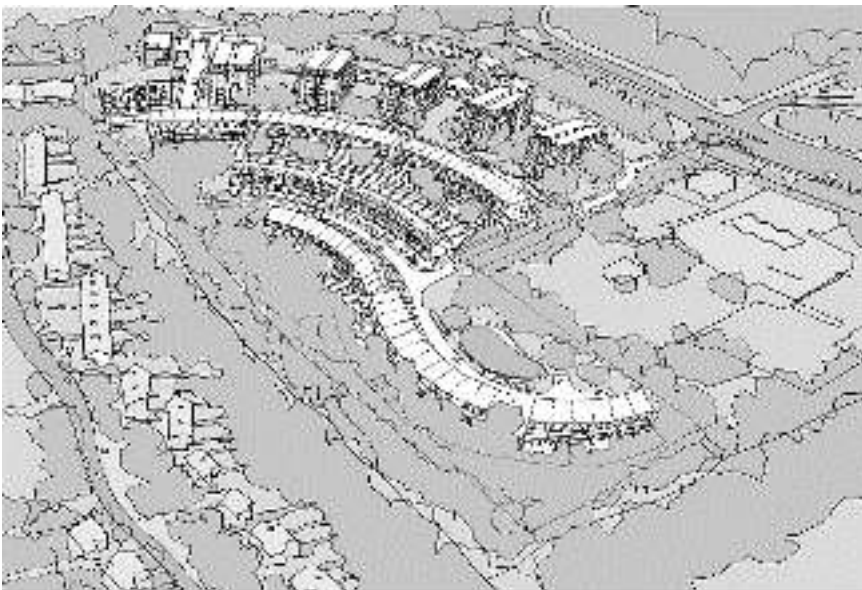
the High Street and many of you took the time to comment on the proposals at the public exhibition in October (see Derek Epstein's piece below). A huge amount of work is going into the organisation of these initiatives and we trust that the results will enhance our High Street and make it a better place to shop. Thank you to those who have passed on ideas for other initiatives – please keep them coming. The OLF money has to be spent by the end of March 2012, so we should start noticing the difference very soon!

JUDITH CLOUSTON

CAT HILL

A major planning application is being considered by Enfield Council for the redevelopment of the former Middlesex University campus at Cat Hill in New Barnet. The redevelopment scheme is for new housing by L&Q, a major London Housing Association. The plans include the building of 272 new residential units, 94 of which will be family houses. 79 of the latter will be for sale. The scheme has attracted local opposition, mostly in connection with the proposed scale of some of the apartment buildings, which go up to six storeys.

For more information, visit Enfield's planning website and enter the ref TP110904.



BARNET COUNTRYSIDE CENTRE

Noah's Ark Children's Hospice has made a planning application in the last few weeks for reserved matters for their proposed redevelopment of Barnet Countryside Centre (the former Curriculum Centre) in Byng Road. The proposals comprise: erection of a 6 bedroom children's hospice with ancillary facilities, 26 car parking spaces and 2 x mini bus spaces, cycle, bin and recycling storage areas, two timber walkways, fencing, hard and soft landscaping and play areas, a drainage pond, footpath adjacent to Byng Road and an Environmental Centre. The application can be seen on LB Barnet's Planning website (application ref B/04065/11).

Outline planning consent for the scheme was granted in 2009, so the principles of land use and building in the Green Belt have already been established. Under existing national planning policy PPG 2 there is a general presumption against inappropriate development in the Green Belt. New buildings are generally seen as inappropriate development unless it can be shown they are essential for '.....outdoor recreation..... and for other uses of land which preserve the openness of the Green Belt'.

In their report at outline stage, officers said they considered that '...very special circumstances have been demonstrated to justify granting planning permission for the proposed development. The proposed hospice would replace existing old and derelict buildings on the site which themselves do not fall within the range of uses that are generally appropriate in the Green Belt. Whilst the hospice is larger than the buildings it replaces, this would not be so significant such as to detract from the openness of character of this part of the Green Belt. Indeed the design and appearance as indicated would enhance this part of the Green Belt and its siting would, compared to existing, allow for wider open public views through the site. The proposal would maintain the existing nature reserve and the provision of the new countryside centre building would facilitate its continued existence and wider community use.'

The scheme is well-designed and well thought through; the detailed landscape proposals are particularly welcomed. However, the application seeks to increase the size of both buildings from that approved at outline stage and this pushes the proposed Environmental Centre further into the Green Belt. It appears this could be avoided if the car park between the two buildings were to be reduced in size and we will be writing to the Council with this comment. Otherwise, the scheme has much to commend it and we will support it, as long as further encroachment into the Green Belt is prevented.

BARNET MUSEUM

We are pleased to be able to say that the latest news on the Museum is sounding more positive. Representatives of the Museum met with the Council earlier in the summer and were told that their Forward Plan was being recommended for acceptance by Members. We understand this means that the Council is agreeing to the Museum staying on in the current premises, although the terms are still to be agreed. There were discussions about a possible two-stage lease with an initial rent-free period to cover the costs of bringing the building up to a reasonable standard and of a Capital Asset Transfer, or 99-year lease at a peppercorn rent. The latter would be a first for the Council and they will need additional information about the Museum's financial plans for the future, including improvement to the service offered to the community and development of a sink fund to cover unexpected building costs. The Museum is developing plans to improve facilities at the Museum and to involve young people through projects with Barnet College and Barnet Football Club. We await further news and will continue to lobby on the Museum's behalf.

JUDITH CLOUSTON

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT

We welcome Mr and Mrs Norris, Mr S Jacques and Mr and Mrs Burstow as new members of the Barnet Society

Subscription renewals for the current year have dwindled to a trickle. Written reminders to those who have still not paid are enclosed with this newsletter and I would urge the recipients to respond promptly by sending me the amount requested.

The Committee has decided to launch a recruitment drive to cover the core area of High Barnet from which most of our membership is drawn. This is to be rolled out in stages using professional distributors. It was felt that the response we are seeking could only be achieved by blanket coverage which was beyond the scope of our own volunteer helpers. So thanks to all who offered assistance, but take a break this time round.

JOHN GARDINER

BARNET TRADERS & HIGH BARNET TOWN TEAM

The High Barnet Town Team on behalf of Barnet Traders has been very busy since publication of the last Newsletter so I thought I would try and give you a quick catch up.

You may have heard Ray from Vision On and Sally from Retail Revival speaking at the Bull Theatre early in September. Well, since then things have moved on.

The ladies from Vision On have recruited traders to join their master class and shop window training scheme and have been thrilled at the number who wanted to join; far in excess of the twenty four places that are being funded. The training has now begun and we will all reap the benefits of a beautiful shop window scheme in our high street for the duration of the Christmas period, and let's hope that it continues well after that.

In tandem, Sally Williams of Retail Revival has been working very hard to put together an exciting three day programme of Saturday events that will support the traders and hopefully have something for everyone. Beginning at 10.00am on Saturday 26th November many local shops will add a piece from a well known board game to their shop window. All you have to do is fill in a form by naming the piece found in each shop window. The first 50 correct entries submitted before 5.00pm on 26th November will win a £5.00 shopping voucher to spend in Waitrose. All other correct entries submitted before 5.00pm on 26th November will win a free gift.

At 2.30 in The Spires Shopping Centre you can become a Record Breaker and help put Barnet on the map. We are aiming to beat the Guinness World Record for the most people playing dominoes blindfolded at any one time. Participants must simultaneously play at least one game of dominoes to its completion, for a minimum of 10 minutes and we need at least 250 people to participate. Visit the website to register and find out more www.barnetdomino.co.uk

And what about trying to win £500 with Barnet Battle Shops loyalty shopper's game by spending £10 in one transaction in at least ten shops?

Please make a huge note in your diary: Saturday December 3rd. At 5.30pm the first town centre Christmas tree for many years will be ceremoniously lit by a celebrity or two in front of St John the Baptist Church. During the day there will be a great programme "Things that go Bump in Barnet", designed with young people in mind. Susi Earnshaw will be presenting three showings of "The Nightmare before Christmas" and there will be a shop and drop area also

in The Bull. Add to this a family ghost tour and a chat with a friendly barn owl and it should be a great and ghoulish day.

On Sunday December 4th the Christmas Fayre will kick off at midday. This year promises to be the best for many years with cookery demonstrations by local celebrity chefs and a new addition “The Village”, a well lit, covered and heated shopping area with stalls selling quality gifts, clothing, jewellery and more. The programme ends on Saturday December 17th with a Family Fun Day. Fashion and Beauty Show, Art Wall, Circus Skills, all add up to the end of a brilliant month of events for our town centre.

Find out all about this and more on www.visithighbarnet.com where you will find the online version of High Barnet Town Centre Christmas Programme.



Domino record sought – see page 7

I don't know if you read the adverts that appeared in our local paper and shop windows advertising Barnet College Business Start up Programme to encourage and support entrepreneurs in how to put together a business plan and set up a business. Well, by the time you receive this Newsletter the programme will have completed and hopefully I will be able to report back its success to you in the next issue.

Oh, and not forgetting that we have agreed to support Cherry Lodge by giving them an additional £500 for lights for the trees in the Church Garden.

And so, on to trader promotion. In order to encourage trade in the area we are in the process of seeking estimates for a pop-up shop which we hope we will have funds to support and with our grateful thanks to James Freeman of Victoria Bakery who offered us his vacant premises that sadly are unsuitable. So if you happen to know of anyone who has something interesting to sell and would like to try his hand at retailing for about six weeks with minimal costs, do point them in our direction.

We have also tried hard to engage with other landlords who have empty shops in the High Street. We thought they would be happy to see their empty shop used as a pop up shop, or perhaps an art gallery – to show artwork of students from the local schools and college. We have even tried to provide hoarding art that was to be created by the students at Barnet College, but it seems that Barnet landlords on the whole prefer to leave their shops empty and unsightly. We will continue to try!

There are plans afoot for a fabulous Town Centre Magazine designed and edited by local graphic designer Chris Smith. The fund has awarded him £2,000 to kick start this but he hopes to be able to get together some additional funding so if you know anyone who might like to sponsor this glossy venture please do get in touch with Chris via email: csdes@dircon.co.uk.

Now what about the shop fronts in our High Street? Many of them are in a very sorry state of repair. We have trudged up and down, and up and down the High Street again and again, offering money from the Mayor's Fund to pay for new shop signage, maybe a new awning, a coat of paint, but believe it or not it has been almost impossible to engage with landlords and shopkeepers who seem NOT to want something for almost nothing other than a request to tidy the inside of their shop where appropriate, loyalty, and support for our High Street. We finally struck lucky however and in the next few months you will see a new image emerging at the top end of our High Street as an exemplar for others to follow. Those agreeing to the work include Smokers' Paradise, Barnet Opticians and Flairline that together will make a nice run. There were a few other landlords keen to participate but our budget is tight. We intend to use conservation colours even where the design is contemporary. Watch this space.....and please bear with us. All this takes consideration and time!

I fear that if I say much more the editor will strike a line through my work for taking up too much space. So can I just ask that you follow us on the Barnet Society website as well as at www.visithighbarnet.com and do stay in touch.

And lastly, on behalf of The Town Team and Barnet Traders, we wish you a very merry Christmas and hope you enjoy the show. Until 2012

AND ANOTHER THING:

Announcing the second High Barnet Lottery. Following the success of the first High Barnet Lottery, tickets are about to go on sale in more than twenty shops in our High Street for the second lottery. The £600 profit from the first High Barnet Lottery is being given as prize money. There will be two winning tickets, the first a prize of £400 and the second £200.

The odds are so much better than those of the National Lottery, and if we sell all the tickets printed, the spring 2012 Lottery prize money promises to offer an even greater reward.

Please support your local traders and your local lottery by purchasing a ticket or three. The draw will take place in January in time to pay the bills for your Christmas purchases.

Thank you

GAIL LASER – Chair, Barnet Traders & High Barnet Town Team

BARNET SOCIETY GARDEN PARTY

Huge thanks go to Barbara Rossiter for hosting our Garden Party in September. Barbara's generosity in opening up her home and in providing such delicious home-made scones is greatly appreciated. Thanks also to Gail Laser for the splendid pavlovas and to Mary Rossiter for the sandwiches and for organising the entertainment (live music, care of the very talented Tim Leffman). The weather was pretty mixed and so most of us passed a very pleasant afternoon in the house, not the garden. Nevertheless it was very good to see so many of you and we hope to make the event a regular part of our calendar from now on.

PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT NOTES

My overwhelming focus of activity over the last three months has been working flat out on the implementation of the numerous initiatives funded by the £416,000 award won from the Mayor of London's Outer London Fund, announced in the Stop Press of our August newsletter. The money was won by a bid put together by a group from The Barnet Society, Barnet Residents Association, Hadley Residents Association and Barnet Traders Association,

together calling ourselves The High Barnet Town Team and working with Barnet Council who submitted the bid to the GLA. Chipping Barnet was one of thirty successful ‘places’ out of seventy that applied. Much of the Town Team’s efforts have since been devoted to progressing the “soft” (trader promotion and support) activities that Gail describes elsewhere.

The largest single ‘hard’ (capital works) proposal is the re-landscaping of the Churchyard garden of St John the Baptist Church to make it more accessible and inviting to the public, forming a town garden as a focus for our town centre and designing out the incidence of anti-social behaviour.

Architects and urban designers Metropolitan Workshop have been appointed to design the improvements to the Churchyard garden. An exhibition took place on 22nd & 23rd October to illustrate the emerging ideas and proposals and to seek comments from residents. The exhibition boards displayed a number of possibilities for the Churchyard garden. Four ‘Options’ shown on the boards were not alternative schemes but rather sketches intended to illustrate general issues upon which members of the public were invited to give their views.

Visitors to the exhibition were asked for their age band, where they live, whether they use the garden and, if so, what for. 140 people completed a comments form. Responses indicated a strong preference for widening both ends of Church Passage, removing existing boundary hedges, opening up views of the War Memorial and installing better lighting after dark. Views about having a more formal or informal layout were split 50:50 and there was no clear preference about increasing areas of paving or grass. Two thirds would prefer traditional benches and fittings.

Visitors were invited to offer additional comments. Some people were concerned that making the garden a more public space would encourage litter and anti-social behaviour, whilst others were in favour of making it more accessible with, for example, café tables on the High Street corner. Several people were concerned about the ability of the Council to adequately maintain a newly landscaped space. Just twelve respondents wanted to keep the space unchanged as a secluded churchyard.

The responses were fed back to the designers who then had a week to prepare a recommended design for presentation to a Steering Group comprising the Council (officers and ward councillor David Longstaff), Town Team representatives and the Church. The design was endorsed by the Steering Group as having reconciled, as far as possible, the sometimes disparate views expressed by residents while accommodating site constraints in terms of

levels, trees etc and the need to contain maintenance costs. The scheme was submitted to the Diocese on 4th November and will be exhibited and submitted for planning permission shortly. It is an absolute condition of the OLF award that all of the money has to be spent by 31 March 2012.

Planning of the other public realm works funded by the OLF award is proceeding. A services scan has been carried out to find locations where street trees can be planted away from underground pipes and cables. A preliminary street clutter audit has been carried out, comparing the tentative proposals made, separately, by the Council and the Town Team. 43 new heritage-style litter bins have been ordered to replace those, in mixed styles, currently dotted around the town centre. Studies are in hand to establish which guard rails are inessential and can be removed without jeopardising safety. (In Kensington High Street, accidents involving pedestrians reduced by 43% after guard rails were removed.)

Aside from the OLF work, life goes on. The planning application for demolition and redevelopment of Barnet Court House was rejected by the Council on the grounds that “The proposed development by reason of its bulk, mass, size, height, design and siting would result in a cramped, dominant and inappropriate form of development, out of character and scale with surrounding development, detrimental to the character and appearance of the streetscene, general locality and visual amenity of neighbouring residential occupiers.” Recently the owners both marketed the property to be let and lodged an appeal against the refusal of planning permission. A date for the appeal has not yet been set.

Changes continue to occur to our High Street, mostly not for the better, with several shops closing down. However, Wize Choice has responded to the enforcement notice served on them in respect of their unauthorised solid external roller shutter and replaced it with an ‘open’ internal one. The new owners of Pound Planet – now Maison – removed an authorised large red banner when so instructed by the Council and the failure of Abasi’s business, although leaving a messy vacant unit immediately facing the College and the Church does at least offer the potential for a more appropriate shop front and fascia in this sensitive location when a new occupier takes over.

Meanwhile, proposed changes in national planning policy have been much in the news and are of very real concern to us. You would think that with an approved London Plan and a Core Strategy for LB Barnet shortly going through its Examination in Public and expected to be adopted early next year, we in Barnet –and in Chipping Barnet – would be relatively safe from

inappropriate development. But not so. Read our representation letter to the DCLG printed below.

DEREK EPSTEIN

BARNET SOCIETY LETTER TO DCLG 17 October 2011

National Planning Policy Framework

This is the response of The Barnet Society to your invitation to submit comments on the draft National Planning Policy Framework.

The Barnet Society is a non-political organisation that campaigns for the preservation and improvement of the environment of Chipping Barnet and surrounding areas and for protection of the Green Belt. Founded in 1945, the Society was established to give a voice to local people who believed that the Green Belt needed defending. We continue in that role today but also campaign for the improvement of our built environment and the enhancement of our town.

Whilst The Barnet Society acknowledges and encourages the need for reform of the planning system in England, we are fearful of a new NPPF that ‘throws the baby out with the bathwater’. Much recent planning guidance is sound and should be retained – we have come a long way in understanding:

- the environmental impacts of development,
- the need to develop mixed use and mixed tenure communities,
- the benefits of bringing housing back to town centres,
- the harm produced by out-of-town/ edge-of-town development,
- the importance of utilising brownfield sites,
- the need to protect our natural and built heritage and
- the need for local infrastructure to support and enable growth.

This aids the growth of sustainable development and must continue to guide the evolution of our future town and country-landscape. The NPPF must provide the means for delivering sustainable development in a clear and succinct way, but it must also provide the strategy for achieving it.

Our comments on the draft NPPF are as follows:

1. Impact on The Green Belt

The Barnet Society welcomes the inclusion of a dedicated section on The Green Belt and agrees with the stated objectives.

We share the concerns of the London Green Belt Council, however, that the draft NPPF does not include the clear statement made in PPG2 that ‘the quality of the landscape is not relevant to the inclusion of land within a Green Belt or to its continued protection’. We are fortunate in Barnet to be surrounded by Green Belt of very high quality, but nonetheless we wish to see such a statement included as we know that arguments about the quality of such land, if permitted, will inevitably lead to its erosion.

The draft also allows development under the new ‘Community Right to Build’ to override Green Belt protection and should certainly be resisted strongly.

2. It is not the national planning policy that is inhibiting development

Housebuilders hold land banks with permission for development sufficient to fulfil three years’ supply. That is normally the case, with supply and permissions coming forward on a rolling basis.

Housing development is being inhibited not by the planning system but rather by the unavailability of finance to housebuilders and house purchasers. Other, more effective, means could be found to stimulate demand for new housing for sale, such as short-term stamp duty holidays.

The value of land, particularly in the south-east, is inflated as potential buyers believe that they can get planning permission for developments at ever higher densities. Clearer policy requirements for family housing (in houses, rather than flats) would help to reduce the ‘hope’ (and monetary) value.

3. The planning system is in need of simplification and streamlining

We agree that the system needs to be simplified, but not to the extent that is proposed.

The complexity of the bureaucratic rules and procedures makes obtaining planning permission incredibly time consuming, costly and frustrating. However, much of the guidance and many of the policies that have been added in over the years were the result of seeing how the system works in practice and ‘improving’ it. As they are based on active experience, these changes and additions should be the starting point for reform, rather than being deleted in their entirety.

We do not believe the stated aim of reducing over 1,000 pages of national policy to around 50 will ‘allow people and communities back into planning’.

Planning policy may sometimes inhibit or delay development but, more often, it is interpretation by individual planning authorities that causes delays and/or other problems. The removal of much of the extant planning framework is unlikely to improve this. It is more likely, in fact, to make it worse.

4. Sustainable development is not any development

The NPPF does not define ‘sustainable development’. Instead it refers to the Brundtland Commission’s definition ie ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. Whilst we would not disagree with such a statement, it is so vague as to be useless.

The Planning Policy for Scotland includes a comprehensive section on the definition of sustainable development, which is based on the UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy 2005 – a 186 page document!

In his foreword to the NPPF, Greg Clark says that a presumption in favour of sustainable development should be the basis for every (Local Authority) plan and decision. Without a full definition, this is a very dangerous stance to take. It could mean, in effect and fact, that every planning/local authority could develop its own definition of sustainable development, vary that to suit its views at the time, and then base decisions on it.

5. Planning for growth should mean planning for growth, NOT “anything goes”

The Barnet Society generally supports appropriate growth, but considers that the NPPF must provide a framework for strategic planning with ‘vision’. Development should be planned - focussed and encouraged - in designated areas such as New Towns (Garden Cities), development corridors, industrial and ‘Silicon valley’ locations and town centres, and discouraged in others. The draft should reinstate the requirement to build on brownfield sites first.

This requires a plan-led system with teeth, NOT a free-for-all.

6. Development should be in accordance with development plans

The requirement that consent for development must be granted where there is no adopted development plan – or the plan is silent on a particular issue – opens the floodgates to development that is not sustainable.

We understand that 80% of local authorities in the country have no adopted development plan. Permitting uncontrolled development in those areas as a means of encouraging those authorities to get their plans approved is perverse and highly damaging. The scars of that policy will remain with us for decades to come.

Even if, as we hope will be the case shortly in LB Barnet, there is approved a Core Strategy, this is only the beginning. It promises a town centre strategy for Chipping Barnet, but, although talked about for several years, and in spite of the establishment of the Strategy Board, nothing has yet been produced. The

NPPF says that in those circumstances, there will be a presumption in favour of ‘sustainable development’ (whatever that means). This is not acceptable.

The current proposals remove the role of regional development authorities (apart from the GLA) and assume that local communities will fill the gap. Whilst we fully support a move towards empowering local people, it is misleading (and dishonest) to expect such groups to be able to produce plans that look outside their immediate neighbourhoods or to consider the wider strategy. The RDA’s were largely unaccountable, but their role must be replaced by some body - perhaps elected councils could work in cross-boundary co-operation to produce strategic area plans instead.

If local plans are not in place, then the new NPPF must not be allowed to apply.

7. Development plans should be enforceable

Even if detailed development plans are in place, they will not be enforceable under the NPPF as drafted. The NPPF provides that planning consent should always be granted:

“unless the adverse impacts of allowing development would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole.” (NPPF, paras 14, 20, 110 and 165)

Consent cannot therefore be refused on the grounds that the proposal is contrary to the approved development plan. It cannot be refused on the grounds that it is undesirable, nor even on the grounds that it has demonstrable adverse impacts. Consent can be refused only if the local planning authority can prove that the adverse impacts of the proposal significantly outweigh the benefits. A proposal which is contrary to the approved the development plan - a plan approved following community consultation and endorsed, after rigorous examination, by a planning inspector.

This provision effectively drives a coach and horses through the whole planning system.

8. Localism is not the answer

Much is made of the notion of putting power into the hands of local communities. Whilst we agree with the principle, we consider that in very many cases, the prospect of diverse local communities with different interests and attitudes being able to mobilise and reach a consensus are slight.

Even if that can be achieved, the preparation of a local plan requires skills sets and financial resources that few, if any, local stakeholder groups possess. It is unclear (at least to us) whether it is or can be guaranteed that such support –

technical and financial – will be available, whether from the local planning authority or elsewhere.

Even if these massive obstacles can be overcome, the approved local plan will not be enforceable (see 7, above). So why bother?

9. “Fools Rush in”. Stop and think

Significant changes to the planning system are proposed within the Localism Bill, which is still going through parliament and whose outcomes are far from being settled. Setting, or even discussing, a National Planning Policy Framework in those circumstances would seem to be both premature and foolhardy.

A completely revised draft NPPF should be prepared in due course, taking into account all of the comments received on the current draft – as well as the provisions of the Localism Act when enacted.

10. Be proud of our planning system

England was at the forefront of Town and Country Planning when the idea was first conceived and its towns and countryside (generally) show the benefits of planning.

We do not wish to see our country developed in the way that some have done in recent years. You have only to look across the Irish Sea to understand how unsustainable growth can be, if it is not planned and/or controlled appropriately. We should celebrate our good sense in having prevented England from suffering a similar fate.

Our planning system and procedures need simplification, that is certain. But they should NOT simply be thrown away.

We are convinced that the principal beneficiaries of the proposed NPPF will not be our local communities, but the legal profession, who must be rubbing their hands in anticipation of the vast amount of work that will result from this ill-conceived draft. Having witnessed at first hand the ways that lawyers can manipulate the current system to their clients' advantage, we dread to think how easy it will be under such a new system. This will NOT produce sustainable development, as the government hopes, but rather encourage less scrupulous developers to exploit the lack of framework to their advantage and to the disadvantage of our communities.

The letter was copied to Rt Hon Theresa Villiers, MP for Chipping Barnet

HIGH BARNET GREEN HOME ZONE is a not-for-profit community initiative set to help local residents, businesses, schools faith and community groups to reduce their energy bills, cut their carbon emissions and engage more with the environment.

The independent social enterprise is run by local residents and is initially concentrating on 2,250 homes which includes the housing around The Spires and Meadway – although there has been much engagement with the communities in East and New Barnet.

Since its launch in March 2010 the volunteer-led enterprise has had a fantastic response, commencing with an eco fair in Chipping Barnet Library attended by 300 residents and 10 participating groups, spearheading green initiatives in local schools, assisting more than 100 local residents directly, and securing an allotment.

To book a 30-minute home visit, residents are asked to complete a simple Home Energy Check form, which gives the trained home visitors an overview of a home's energy use and environmental practices. The volunteers then provide an energy check in the residents' own home to give them advice on practical ways to reduce CO2 emissions, save money and even how to generate energy from renewable energy sources.

The Home Zone was initially launched when local residents Gordon Miller, Tanya Adams and Sarah Challice individually wanted to help the community after finding out that Barnet was one of the highest carbon emitters in London. As its name suggests it is primarily based in High Barnet but provides a service throughout the borough on request.

Gordon Miller works as a journalist specialising in sustainability issues and is also a practicing licensed BREEAM buildings assessor, Tanya Adams had a background in town planning and is a qualified energy assessor, and Sarah Challice, who has PR and marketing experience, is passionate about stopping the excessive use of plastic shopping bags in the borough.

I asked some of the volunteers to explain the scheme. Gordon Miller told me: "We wanted to start something at a community level to help local residents, our neighbours, to tackle their energy efficiency and improve their environmental awareness. It can seem daunting but we offer simple, easy to achieve solutions that often cost very little money and can save householders a fair few pounds – and make their home warmer."

With a small amount of start up capital from Barnet council, the High Barnet Home Zone launched with an eco fair in March 2010 and has been going

from strength to strength ever since. They have had features in the local press and the national press including The Sunday Times, The Guardian and The Sunday Telegraph. They have helped Christ Church School with an environmental audit and are currently shortlisted for Barnet Council's Big Innovation fund.

Gordon Miller said: "To make one's home warmer, it's often about installing basic insulation rather than necessarily spending lots of money. The first step is to 'plug the draughts and gaps'. That can save £200 a year and there are plenty of grants around that we advise people to apply for. Then, we can assist residents to consider solar panels, or other renewable energy sources, to generate cheaper electricity and heat.

"The initiatives we can advise on are not just short-term results that will be beneficial for us but future generations. A lot of it is changing people's mindset and mentality. For an older generation it is second nature putting on an extra jumper or turning the heating down. We can't turn the clock back but we can marry modern technology to traditional practices to improve our home's warmth and reduce ever-increasing energy bills."

Tanya Adams adds: "The government are looking at how we can bring in retrofitting insulation which enables new technology to be applied to old systems, and we want to work alongside those measures and help residents bring their houses up to the standards needed to increase insulation". A final word from Sarah Challice "We offer residents impartial advice, we are not aligned to any company or service so if we recommend a solar company it's because we have researched them! My favourite part is bringing the water saving gadgets and owls (electricity monitors) to residents homes and showing them how they can save money by simple measures. It's very powerful and rewarding to show people how much electricity they can save through small actions."

To book a home energy visit, or to become one of our volunteers please contact Sarah Challice on 079807 32727 or email us at info@greenhomezone.org. We ask for a voluntary £30 donation for the visit to further our not-for-profit work in the community, and we provide training for volunteers.

OPEN DOOR UPDATE.

Readers will recall the article in the August Newsletter outlining the project to acquire the old school building in St Albans Road for use as a centre catering predominantly for the needs of older people in the High Barnet community.

Since then a purchase price of £330,000 has been agreed with the existing owners, the Red Cross, with completion required by mid February 2012. In the meantime the funds raised have continued to increase, but are currently still £60,000 short of what is needed to secure purchase by the February deadline. It is hoped that this imaginative scheme, with the potential to benefit so many people in our community, will not be allowed to flounder at this stage. For those wishing to know more, go to www.opendoorappeal.co.uk

JOHN GARDINER

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Saturday 26th November: Shop Window Board Game Competition

Saturday 26th November 2.30 in The Spires: Domino record attempt

Saturday 3rd December 5.30: Christmas Tree and other activities

Sunday 4th December, 12 midday: Christmas Fayre

Saturday 17th December: Family Fun Day

TUESDAY 13th DECEMBER: PRE-CHRISTMAS WALK OVER THE MILL HILL AND TOTTERIDGE FIELDS led by Diane Nightingale

Come and enjoy a pleasant, rural walk of about 3½ miles followed by lunch at The Three Hammers pub on the Ridgeway in Mill Hill. Meet in Burtonhole Lane, Mill Hill, NW7 at 10.00am. Road parking here.

Contact Diane on 0208 440 0203 if lift required or if you can offer one.

Friday 10 February 2012 at 3pm: Put your questions to your MP, Rt Hon Theresa Villiers (venue tbc)

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