

The Development and Heritage Group, Chaired by Jim Meikle (who is currently in Australia, which is why I was left holding this particular baby last night!), has had a good number of meetings, and Jim has produced a 6–page skeleton draft of how we think the Plan should be constructed. It could be anywhere between 40 and 70 pages in its final form – a big task.

Preparing what is in effect a development plan is a great responsibility; we have a wide range of skills and experience, and are still finding it daunting, so for communities new to the game, it must be discouraging. We are all volunteers with limited time, so it's essential to identify, from everyone's experience of living in the area, what the main issues are, and the simplest and most effective way of getting them adopted as official local planning policy. The Government have already made clear that plans cannot include anything you want – you cannot contradict national, regional or local policy.

Our first task has been to set the parameters and aims of the Development Plan:

- that our area is rich in heritage, ecological and other assets, and is also a thriving community, with a huge range of skills and interests, which needs to be looked at holistically, and the legacy of being split between two local authorities has let us down very badly indeed here;
- that the aim is to retain and protect what is good, improve what is not so good, and ensure that new development is well–designed and benefits the area;
- and to identify the main national and local policy contexts within which we have to work.

We have identified several major aspects of what we think the Plan should deliver;

- we have identified five 'strategic areas' – the Wellington Gyration, the Highgate Station area (which we believe has great potential for a range of community uses, but which is also designated a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation), the Highgate Bowl, the Village Core, and the Archway Road – and have set up working groups for each;
- we have identified some 27 potential development sites (remember that "development" does not necessarily mean new or increased building, but improvement or enhancement of the present use – for example, the Thames Water site on Aylmer Road). Where appropriate, we will need to discuss our proposals for them with adjoining residents and other stakeholders;
- we have proposed that several of those sites be included by Haringey in the part of their Development Management Plan which identifies major sites which Haringey consider sufficiently key for their areas that their future use should be incorporated into Haringey's formal development policy; that in itself was quite an intensive task for us;
- other initiatives on the Planning front include our intention to update and adopt several important planning policies unfortunately dropped by Haringey, and Camden, some years ago. These performed a valuable function in setting out how particularly sensitive or important areas should be developed – and those areas have deteriorated badly since the policies were dropped. They are not contrary to any current legislation, and we aim to restore them. They are:
 - The Archway Road Regeneration Plan, written at Haringey's request by local people in 2000, and approved. It was never implemented, and when the HS asked why not, some years later, we were told by Haringey's Head of Planning that "Archway Road is a declining area and will have to be sacrificed."
 - The "Fringes of Hampstead Heath Area of Special Character" policies of both Camden and Haringey, which were effective in preventing the excessive developments which, since the policy was dropped, have been damaging not only the visual character of our Conservation Area, but its actual existence as part of the Highgate community, as the gated megamansions of Bishops Avenue threaten to advance relentlessly towards Highgate.

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There are other issues we need to address.

- We want to address the issue of Basements: a fraught subject, with serious implications for neighbours, where applications for huge basements are being permitted by local authorities who have no expertise in the subject and rely on engineers' reports submitted by applicants (have you ever seen a specialist applicant's report which concludes that the proposal should be refused?); one basement permitted in Fitzroy Park is 13 metres deep (the local residents are trying to challenge the permission at judicial review), and the basement permitted at Witanhurst was 12,000 cubic metres. We believe the issue is a real problem for the area, with its unstable geology and complex hydrology, and have set up a working group to gather information on the impact of completed basements in the area, with a view to producing a stronger policy than the local authorities, and particularly Haringey, have in their local plans. If you have any information about the side-effects a basement near you, please let our expert on the subject, Karen Beare, know;
- We are concerned at massive overdevelopment in parts of the area - the advance of the gated megamansions I've already mentioned, often of signally bad design - for example, the recent attempt to replace one of an unspoilt row of Edwardian houses with a huge pastiche Jacobean mansion in Broadlands Road, which I'm glad to say the HS managed to defeat on appeal.
- We want to improve the quality of new development; to find whether some social housing can be provided within the area; and to get both local authorities to have a better regard for public realm design - pavements, signage, street furniture. One of our thoughts is to produce some kind of urban design guidelines that will help set standards for good development in the area.
- Another long-standing, and very serious issue, has been the abysmal standard of planning enforcement, particularly in Haringey; we have discussed the urgent need for improvement with our local authorities, and are encouraged by the fact that the new Chief Executive of Haringey recognises planning and enforcement there as one of their biggest challenges, and intends to do something about it.
- I have hardly even mentioned Heritage. Don't worry; it's a major concern of ours, and will be integral to everything we do - and, as we are a Development and Heritage group, we must also introduce a much stronger policy on archaeological work in the area; both Boroughs have a dismal record on archaeological work ahead of development.

I have been somewhat critical of our local authorities. However, we have had huge support from all our Ward Councillors; both Boroughs are now being extremely supportive of the Forum and our efforts to produce the Plan, we have established good relations with their officers and are also working with organisations such as the GLA and Transport for London.

We are working closely with the Forum's member groups and other local groups, and, of course, with other working groups within the Forum.

We are also watching the progress, and products, of other Neighbourhood Forums.
