

DISCUSSION PAPER – CAMDEN'S POLICY OF LOCAL PRIORITIS IN LARGE PLANNING APPLICATIONS.

Many local groups South of the Euston Road are frustrated because they see the planning system apparently ignoring local needs; large new developments which crowd out/disadvantage local residential areas are given planning permission. There is some growing feeling that Camden planning authority should give more priority to local residential areas.

This is a complex and quite delicate matter, to persuade Camden to amend their planning policy, or at least change the emphasis they place on local needs.

We have set out some basic thoughts, and invite other local groups to discuss these issues with us, and see if we can arrive at a collective stance.

- **Problem with the present planning system.**

On the face of it, this is an open and democratic process. Once a planning application is made, local groups can make their objections.

Often these objections for large developments (hospitals, universities, private housing estates) follow a familiar pattern; overshadowing, restriction of natural light, light pollution at night, lack of privacy, access and parking issues, diminished green space/trees/planting, lack of community gain – or all/any of the above, plus any particular local issues.

Many of these problems could be solved by a redesign of the proposals. However, although minor alterations can be made, and often are made, the main design of the proposals are set in stone by the time the proposal reaches the public consultation stage, and so no real design changes are made to accommodate local needs. Basically, the developers have spent their design budget and time at this early stage, and have made no allowance of funds for redesign. Local groups can feel insulted/marginalised by this planning consultation, which apparently discounts their objections in order to prefer the big picture... the “greater good”.

In reality the planning system is more complex. In summary, Camden Planning have obligations to follow the guidelines and policies of the London Plan (GLA) and the National Plan (Whitehall), as well as to fulfil their own policies and guidelines. We have to remember that Camden a) must follow National and London guidance, or be in danger of losing their own planning authority b) has no real money to develop their policies (for instance on housing) without doing deals with developers, often through Section 106 agreements. So, Camden is in a very difficult position, and we should not make them out to be the villain.

In practice, a developer will consult with Camden Planning at the beginning of their project, seeking advice. They need to know whether the concept will meet Camden’s policies. Camden advises them in broad terms – phrases such as “comprehensively developing the site” are used. At this point Camden planners could also mention local conditions... but one wonders if they do. Local issues do not generally seem to have a high priority. Then the developers work on their agreed concept, discuss it repeatedly with Camden, and arrive at a concept and design that they like and Camden planners find acceptable. Sometimes the developer will also consult with other relevant and important bodies such as English Heritage (if, for instance, the development site is in a Conservation Area) and take their advice, before a final design is produced. It is only then that the concept and its final design is put out to public consultation.

So, in a sense public consultation truly is a token exercise, since the major decisions of concept, appearance, design and content have already been agreed.

Camden planning appear to compensate local inequality, in part, by making Section 106 agreements on a planning decision; these agreements put duties on the developer to provide council housing, or green planting, or particular community gains such as, maybe, playgrounds or pocket-parks. These features help councils afford to fulfil some of their stated policies (ie housing) and may go some small distance to compensate local communities for discomfort/distress caused by the new development.

This process takes place after the planning decision has been made, and Camden seem to be developing new structures where local groups can comment on the Construction Management Plan (CMP) and feedback information to those, who deal with the Section 106 agreements. We have yet to see how this works out in practice.

It appears to us that the present planning practice gives little or no weight to local neighbourhood needs at the beginning of the planning process, and attempts (in part) to compensate locals late in the process once major decisions have been made. We think that Camden should give more weight to local views at the beginning of the planning process, when local views would have more effect.

How can we do this?

In theory local groups should be able to discuss local needs/issues early in the planning process, when the development/redevelopment is first being envisaged. But this of course is not allowed because “commercial confidentiality” means ordinary people/groups/companies are forbidden access to any information about the proposed plans at this early stage.

However, we do not think this should deter us, or the Council, from making proper consideration of local needs one of the necessary elements which developers MUST meet in order to gain planning permission. After all, we do not need to know exactly what is planned. Instead the developers must need to know the basic “rules” of what will disadvantage the locality and understand that they will not get planning consent if they break these rules.

Since Camden is the planning authority, we therefore have to persuade Camden to do this.

Why local opinions should be given more weight – problems with this view

This is difficult in the present planning context. Current planning thought for Central London seems to be concerned with long-term economic gain (commercial development areas, zones such as the “knowledge zone” which is said to attract commercial neighbours, etc). These views come down the planning hierarchy; Whitehall, Greater London, local authority.

The apparent planning assumption seems to be that residential life will be decided only by market forces, though in fact, in Camden, there still exist some large swathes of Council housing in central London, both in purpose-built estates and in street properties.

It would be unwise to disparage the policy of making central London economically attractive. The issue should be to find ways for economic development to exist in harmony with residential areas.

At the moment residential areas in central London are under stress; high land values mean high rents in the private housing market, which often leads to a transient residential population, or empty “flats to bank”, or transfer of relatively cheap Council properties (through Right-to-Buy) into relatively expensive private lettings.

A transient local residential population can mean a decrease in electoral registration, which can in turn mean re-drawing local ward boundaries, as has happened in Bloomsbury, in order to maintain a reasonable voting base.

Add to these problems the way in which current land development in central London continually squeezes local residential areas, and the present problem is clear.

Settled and permanent local residential areas in Central London are on their way out unless we can persuade local planning authorities, in this instance Camden, to give more weight to local residential areas, without turning them into latter-day Red Indian Reservations (protected but disregarded and continually encroached-upon).

What are the benefits and strengths of stable local residential areas in central London?

These provide a work-force and an electoral base, together with, in theory at least, a lessening of commuter traffic. On a less quantifiable basis (since resident people can cost local authorities money in terms of social provision, schools etc) local residents provide “life” and “income” in a neighbourhood; staff and custom for local

shops, restaurants and pubs, and contribute towards local self-start activities, or run their own businesses. They pay their own way in rent, taxes and community tax, they are not all dependents on State hand-outs.... local residents have real value.

Above all, their presence ensures the central city is a living city, not an empty money-making machine.

What can we do to persuade Camden planners to give more weight to local views?

Some of the ideas we have discussed are:-

- Sensitivity towards the Council's position; they are short of planners, they don't want to take on extra work, and can't afford to do so under the present cuts. In their mind, and we think this is probably true, they are one of the more advanced planning authorities. We don't want to unintentionally make them "the enemy".
- We should be aware, and accept, that the council officials who work in planning, traffic etc have studied and gained professional disciplines; sometimes the local views we express can seem to them to be irrelevant. It is up to us to make them feel better about our opinions; that we are saving them time, not wasting their time.
- We also have to make it clear that the council can use our detailed local knowledge to their advantage; they are not aware, unless we tell them, of issues we think are important. We have a right to state our opposition to views we think are wrong (practically, morally, even politically), but be aware we have no power to insist our views are right. Our power lies in persuasion.
- We need to talk to councillors with direct influence on the Planning committee; Danny Beale, Sue Vincent, Flick Rea spring to mind. We need to recruit our local councillors to favour our cause.
- We need to have some kind of exploratory meeting with the Chief Planner, or some influential Camden planners.
- There appears to be no planning law preventing Camden putting more planning weight on local needs; but there are the demands of the GLA and Whitehall to consider. Also, if Camden makes local wishes too important, developers may find these demands "too onerous" and decide to avoid building in Camden, which might deprive the area of revenue – and that then gets into the party-political arena... which is a shark-pool all of its own.
- There is also the spectre of local needs being exaggerated, which would sink any sensible settlement; local groups do have to take care to be factual in their observations.

Conclusion

There are these and, no doubt, other considerations to bear in mind. This is a discussion paper, and a work in progress.

It is clear that local planning would benefit if developers were required to take heed of local conditions, be encouraged to be more generous and more sympathetic in the relationship of their intended building to its surroundings.

We propose discussing the issue with neighbouring groups, and see if we can come up with a forward-looking plan of action.

Your comments would be appreciated.

JD 06/12/2019