

FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH INTO LOCAL OPINION IN NEW BARNET

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CONTENTS

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY	3
GENERAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE LOCAL AREA	6
ATTITUDES TO FAITH SCHOOLS IN GENERAL.	10
ATTITUDES TO THE PROPOSED NEW FAITH SCHOOL IN WESTBROOK CRESCENT.	16
ATTITUDES TO A POTENTIAL ASDA AND THE GAS WORKS SITE	21
BARNET COUNCIL'S PERCEIVED APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT ISSUES AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY	26

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Background

The research was commissioned and conducted by The Research Practice, a British market research company established in 1990 which works for a wide range of blue chip private sector clients in the UK and internationally, as well as various public bodies.

The aim of the study was to establish, on a scientific basis, the nature of local opinion in relation to some issues relevant to the local area. The study thus explored attitudes to faith schools and to the proposed Jewish faith school to be sited at Westbrook Crescent, as well as the possibility of an Asda supermarket/store on the site of the old gas works in New Barnet as these appeared to be salient local issues of the moment. However the study also enabled participants to raise other issues that they considered to be of local relevance.

Those who participated in the study were informed that the report of findings would be made available to them. Depending on local reaction to this report and to the idea of the survey in general, in the future it may be extended to embrace more participants and other issues that locals feel are relevant to the area.

Methodology

A variety of approaches to interviewing were employed, with the aim of achieving a broad and informative exploration of local opinion. A range of different questionnaires was employed to avoid order effects and to explore whether different wording appeared to impact on responses. Throughout respondents were encouraged to express their own views rather than simply respond to fixed and limited questions. Hence this report contains a wide range of quotes that help give a flavour of responses as a whole. While research of this kind can give rise to statistics, much of the value of such a study rests in the exploration of respondents' own spontaneous feelings and in understanding their thought processes.

Door-to-door interviews were conducted in a variety of locations in New Barnet and constituted the main form of interviewing. While these interviews were based on questionnaires, participants own spontaneous views and ideas were also probed and recorded.

Responses have also been obtained from self-completion questionnaires that were distributed to a sample of people who either live or work in the area. Again most of these questionnaires gave participants the chance to express their own ideas and to raise issues that concerned them. Because respondents could complete these questionnaires in their own time, they had more opportunity to express lengthy and considered responses.

13 qualitative depth interviews have also been conducted together with 3 qualitative group discussions. These have allowed people to express their views in much greater depth, and help to provide a diagnostic framework through which people's ideas, and the relationships between their various opinions, can be more readily understood.

Self-completion questionnaires were also distributed at a meeting organised by Bsaeg to discuss aspects of the proposed Jewish faith school planning application. Here the aim was to explore attitudes to the planning process and local consultation in general amongst people with some proven interest in local issues. Out of 32 self-completion questionnaires distributed at this meeting, 30 were completed and returned. On this questionnaire respondents were asked whether they would be happy to be interviewed further on local issues and their attitudes to democracy in general. Out of the 30 responses, 80% said that they would be happy to do so. While brief follow-up self-completion questionnaires were sent to those who said they would be happy to be interviewed further, longer face-to-face interviews on attitudes to the local area and on democracy have yet to take place.

In total 172 local people have been interviewed to date. The nature of responses (e.g., towards faith schools, potential Asda, etc) is broadly consistent across all sections of the sample (e.g., door-to-door interviews, self-completion questionnaires) and across different questionnaire formats.

Further information on methodology is available on request. Quotes from doorstep interviews are in italics, and those from self-completion questionnaires or qualitative depths and groups are not in italics.

GENERAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE LOCAL AREA

When asked what they particularly liked about the local area, many mentioned its greenery, relative quiet and relaxed pace by comparison with inner London, and even New Barnet's 'village' feel with ready pedestrian access to shops. In spite of problems about access to schools and lack of recreational activities for youngsters, it was seen as a good place in which to bring up a family. Some had been attracted to settle in the area because of these qualities. The areas abundant greenery and 'village' feel may make the local population more aware of environmental issues than in some other areas of London.

"We moved here because of the greenery and the fresh air. It is a pity to see how quickly it is changing with all these high-density blocks of apartments and more traffic."

About a third of those interviewed on the doorstep seemed to have no front-of-mind local issues that particularly bothered them, or at least which emerged in the context of a brief interview. Some of these respondents expressed a level of detachment from, or indifference to, some of the issues that were explored.

"I feel a bit outside these issues. Schools aren't a concern for me."

"It's okay round here. I don't have any problems with the area. No concerns about it really."

However over half of those interviewed on the doorstep were relatively quick to express underlying concerns about the local area. Such people tended to express fuller and stronger opinions in general. This was also true of those who were motivated to return self-completion questionnaires.

Those who expressed stronger opinions were often concerned by the pace and degree of change within the local area. In particular many were concerned about the amount of new housing development, and the resultant

increase in population density, traffic, and parking problems. Many were concerned by the impact this was having on the character of the area, both in terms of the loss of green spaces and architectural heritage.

“Parking round here has become a big problem. Sometimes I end up parking a couple of streets away. And it is a real problem for visitors.”

“I moved here because I thought it was quiet and green. But the way it is going means that is all disappearing. More and more flats mean more people and the infrastructure is under pressure. The roads here are narrow and they can't deal with the traffic and parking.”

“It's criminal to see the way so many Victorian houses have got pulled down to make way for flats. And how did they get away with pulling down the old fire station (corner of Lytton Road and Leicester Road). That was a beautiful old building and could have been converted into flats. But there is no commitment to preservation and no imagination used. The buildings that go up are cheap to build and all to a formula.”

“The streets of New Barnet were designed for a time when motor cars were the exception rather than the rule. ... We have now reached a stage where there are too many parked vehicles and too many cars using the streets.”

“Traffic and parking are already overstretched as it is a Victorian area not designed for the number of cars already using the area.”

“New Barnet is already choked with cars because of new developments where large old houses with gardens have been replaced with blocks of flats where little or no parking is provided except in the street (Park Road and East Barnet Roads particularly). Even in houses with drives (Mount Pleasant Road particularly) where grown up children live at home, there may be as many as four cars to a house. Until fairly recently, Mount Pleasant used to be completely free of parked cars but now you have to drive down there with caution because there may be cars parked on both sides. The more narrow roads for example Victoria, Margaret, and Crescent are very cluttered and there's nowhere for visitors to park.”

“There are scant facilities for youngsters, together with loss of green space make bringing up a family a difficult prospect in New Barnet - Traffic congestion is a very big issue - for safety, traffic calming measures must be implemented throughout the area.”

There was also quite widespread concern about a lack of leisure facilities for youngsters. Some parents also complained that it could be difficult getting children into a good secondary school.

“Getting kids into a good secondary school is a big problem round here.”

Some of these concerns were compounded because some suspected that Barnet Council had little commitment to the area. It was sometimes said that other areas of the Borough seemed to have better public facilities (e.g., sports facilities). There was concern that the Council seemed to make more effort to preserve the character of other parts of the Borough, while quality of life in New Barnet was deteriorating. It was notable that many respondents had lived in the New Barnet area for many years and many felt that its village character and sense of traditional community were under threat.

“All they want to do is to pack in new flats. There is nothing round here for youngsters, no facilities at all.”

“When you look at High Barnet, like those new houses on Moxon Street, you’d say that the Council planners seem to be insisting on a higher standard of development up there.”

“There is no investment in the community facilities around here. And now we are going to lose the only secondary school (East Barnet school at Westbrook Crescent).”

“If they could knock down the Victorian centre (of New Barnet) and build a roundabout they would.”

“The centre of New Barnet is looking a bit shabby.”

“The Town Hall in Hendon is too far away and it is over there that you get more regeneration while I think New Barnet is looking quite run down.”

“The Council would bulldoze Hadley Wood tomorrow if they could. All the Council is interested in is money.”

“Traffic is a problem around here and there is nothing for children. I think New Barnet is a bit run down but then it is away from the hub in Hendon. The regeneration is

going on there and not here. There is a lack of facilities locally. I mean Barnet Council say they are keen on improving parks but they have not improved Victoria Park, and they have closed down the children's play area."

"We are governed by a council that sits in Hendon – a wholly different part of London basically. There is no intention to protect residents and the children and our environment whatsoever. At present not one ward councillor lives in my area and I think that speaks volumes. ... When I hear of a new sports or leisure initiative for Barnet I think 'Oh wow – where's that etc'. And then I find out it's in Cricklewood or Copthall. And while the Council lauds the venture as fulfilling a sports need in the borough etc it seems to forget that it takes 2 buses to get to Tally Ho from New Barnet. God knows how I'd get to Cricklewood from here."

"It does seem that whoever is responsible for planning for the local area is not taking a very strategic view of the long-term impact on the area and what we will end up with. The local area has high property prices as it is considered a desirable location to live in – but if plans for the faith school and an Asda get through, it won't be!"

In an era when government, even local government, is felt to be remote, similar resentments may be found in other areas of the Borough. Clearly the above criticisms should not be read as a fair or balanced assessment of local service provision (e.g., health, access to libraries, etc). However questionnaires that concentrated on development issues inevitably focused respondents on a topic where many seemed to be concerned or even worried. **Concerns about increasing congestion, traffic, and housing density, resulting in a deteriorating quality of life are widespread and deeply felt.** These underlying concerns provide a general context that helps explain reactions to the proposed faith school and to a potential supermarket or superstore development on the site of the old gas works. So too may a more general sense of disempowerment that The Research Practice has investigated in other projects. This general sense of disempowerment reflects a feeling that politics ignores ordinary people and has become the servant of corporate interests that increasingly seem to control many aspects of people's lives and environment.

ATTITUDES TO FAITH SCHOOLS IN GENERAL

Attitudes to faith schools, in the sense of schools where the pupils were drawn predominantly from one religious faith, were explored via questionnaires, respondent's own spontaneous views, and in qualitative depths and group discussions.

When respondents were asked 'Do you approve of building new faith-only schools i.e., predominantly for one religious group?' a majority of the overall sample answered 'no'. **Hence a majority of the overall sample did not favour the building of new faith schools.** It was also notable that those who disapproved of faith schools tended to have more confidence in explaining why they took this view. Hence those who disapproved of faith schools were often quick to explain their reasoning while those who approved of building new ones were often less forceful or confident in advancing a rationale for their point of view.

The way in which the current survey has been conducted provides much insight into why people now oppose faith schools and the range of thoughts that contribute to this view. Those who disapproved of faith schools indicated that their main reason for so doing was because faith schools were perceived to run counter to healthy inter-faith and inter-community relations. **Hence a majority felt that the creation of new faith schools ran counter to their belief and commitment to multiculturalism.**

"I want integration not segregation. Faith schools should not be encouraged. They are against multi-cultural diversity."

"It just engenders separation which is where a lot of problems in society stem from."

"I prefer an educational system where everyone has the same access to education and disagree with the isolation of communities and promoting that isolation at an early age."

"Schools fight each other at the best of times. I know, I'm Catholic, and went to a Catholic school. If schools are divided on religious or cultural grounds it causes

problems. Educational should be multi-cultural with all cultural groups attending the same school.”

“If kids don’t meet and become friends with people from other backgrounds how are they to integrate?”

“We ought to learn to live together and that should start with children when they are young.”

“No, I’m not for religious schools. It is not a fair use of anyone’s money. They will not create a community feel. It’s exclusive, and anti the community.”

“We are all god’s children and we should all be going to the same school and learn to respect each others views and religions otherwise people are not going to get on.”

“Why can’t we all be educated together like we’ve always been? It’s divisive and will divide communities even more.”

Responses suggested that opposition to faith schools is on the increase, with this seemingly reflecting emerging social issues. It seems that people are increasingly aware of the potential dangers of tensions between different communities, with this being fuelled by awareness of recent waves of immigration into the UK, and concerns about cultural divisions and tensions at both a national and global level. Hence the vast majority opposed the creation of new faith schools because these were perceived to run counter to their perception of how a multicultural society could operate successfully. Here there was very widespread acceptance of, and even commitment to, multiculturalism and to a society of very mixed ethnic composition across respondents of all ages. However there was also a belief that this needed to be carefully managed, and that integrated education was a vital element in this. Hence new faith schools appeared to be a retrograde step that was potentially alarming.

“We are a very mixed society now. There has been so much immigration in recent times, and creating a sense of social cohesion is now really important. It’s something politicians now talk about, the need for integration. And faith schools are at odds with integration.”

“There is so much ethnic and cultural diversity now, and I’m okay with that. But it also means that we really need to encourage an inclusive sense of all belonging to the same society. Faith schools are a step backwards in my view. If everyone is going to just stick to their own cultural group then there is going to be no society at all.”

“I believe in integration, especially given the Northern Ireland situation. ... I went to a church school but things change and now the future of education must be integration.”

Education was widely seen to be central to the process whereby people became integrated into a multi-cultural society. It was said that children experiencing other races and cultural groups at school, and befriending people from different backgrounds, was the best way of ensuring that they developed tolerance and a respect for different cultural and religious backgrounds. It was also noted that ethnic minorities would sometimes stick to their own cultural group in the early years of moving to Britain, and that their children going to a school that served the whole community was an important factor in promoting integration.

“It is difficult to respect other groups if you don’t mix with them and get to know them. And I think school is absolutely central to that. Our daughter is friends with children from all sorts of backgrounds, much more than we were, and that is due to the school and I think that is the way it should be.”

“When we came here (i.e., to this country) we were a bit isolated. But then the children make friends with all backgrounds at the school, and we meet their friends. ... If people stick to their own group and go to schools just for that group it cannot be good.”

Increasing concern about social harmony and commitment to building a successful multicultural society meant that some were now actively revising their attitudes to faith schools. Here it was notable that some people who had been educated at faith schools, and who had once supported such institutions, now felt that it was difficult to justify them. This could lead to quite torn feelings, with some finding it difficult to resolve the conflict between their

personal liking for faith schools they had experienced and a growing feeling that they were now more difficult to justify.

“I went to a Catholic school and I was very happy there. I wouldn’t want to take away people’s right to go that route. My sister is sending hers to a Catholic school ... but nowadays you also feel that we need to be more integrated and we need to mix more.”

“If you go to a single faith school it leaves the younger generation unaware of other cultures. I went to a Christian school and then I had to find out about other religions when I got older and that made things harder for me. Multi-faith (i.e., integrated) schools are better, more interesting, because people can practice their faith if they want to. I teach at one in Mill Hill, and it is healthier.”

“It’s difficult because for years there have been Anglican and Catholic schools and it wasn’t that much of an issue. And you can see that other groups may think ‘oh, we should have our own schools too’, and so it is difficult to argue with that. But at the same time we are in a different situation now with more cultures and even ghettos and going the faith school road can only make that worse.”

“My boy goes to a faith school, St Mary’s C.of E., because it is a good school but I don’t really approve of faith schools in principle.”

“I am yet to be convinced that today’s faith schools will not become tomorrow’s enclave education. We are living with the consequence of when the first schooling for the masses was set up by the Church of England. The legacy today is that now we have a greater variety of faiths practised in this country and it must feel very unfair that their right to a faith school has been poorly under-represented. So now we are in the midst of the FSI (Faith School Initiative) – an attempt to redress the balance. I have only found 2 surveys about faith schools on the Internet. One had 80% against faith schools, the second, a more recent MORI poll I believe, was pitched at around 62% against.”

“Faith schools are being encouraged by the government to get more private money into the education system but I’m quite cynical about it. Really these faith schools are a middle class plot. A way of getting your child into a school with a more selective intake because you think it will be a better school. Now you can see that parents will always want to send their children where they will get the best education and you

can't really argue with that. But having to do it under the faith banner is really divisive."

The minority who supported the building of new faith schools were much less forceful in arguing the case for them. This may reflect their awareness of counter-arguments against faith schools.

"I think people have the right to go to faith schools if they want to. A religious element probably makes for better discipline."

"People with a faith are tax payers too so I don't see any problem in the state backing faith schools."

"Everyone has the right to go to a single faith school if that is what they want, but it is not my cup of tea personally. And it is unfortunate for other people who live in the area."

Some of those who supported building new faith schools had specialist knowledge or insight.

"Multi-culturalism is a good idea. But I also think children are entitled to be of their own faith. And from a teaching point of view faith schools work better. I'm a supply teacher in primary schools. You get better standards and discipline in faith schools."

"There is not enough schools in Barnet. I looked all over. They should give everyone more choice. I support more faith schools and went to St Mary's which is Church of England and open to other faiths."

It has been seen that the main expressed reason for opposition to faith schools reflects people's concern about promoting good inter-community relations and multicultural integration. However some also perceived an environmental problem about building faith schools, especially for geographically-dispersed faith communities. Here the concern is that communities that are geographically dispersed will have to travel some distance to attend such schools and that this is environmentally unsound. A growing concern about the environment is also working to persuade people that children should walk or cycle to a local school in their area. It may well be

that the debate about the proposed faith school in New Barnet has made some people more aware of environmental issues that argue against faith schools.

“It is now more important than ever that children walk or cycle to school in their own area. There is a growing environmental issue here. We need to cut down our reliance on cars and everyone needs to play their part. If people are going to travel miles to go to a school it is sending out all the wrong messages.”

“To be honest I wouldn’t have had any problems about faith schools until this local issue came up (i.e., the proposed faith school at Westbrook Crescent). But now I think there is a big environmental issue against sending children long distances to school.”

“We already have a problem with vehicles on the school run. You see it locally at about 4 in the afternoon. Lots of mums driving round frantically collecting kids from school and they drive carelessly because they are arguing with the kids and trying to pacify them, and the roads get clogged up. Well, building schools where the kids will have no option but to drive or be driven is just daft.”

“We ought to be teaching children to respect the environment, not to spend their lives in cars.”

“It’s mad. We are going to have all these people having to drive long distances to get their children to a school in this area. Meanwhile local children will be outside the catchment area of a secondary school, so they will be travelling all over to get to school too. This is no way to organise the education system.”

ATTITUDES TO THE PROPOSED NEW FAITH SCHOOL IN WESTBROOK CRESCENT

It has been seen that the majority of the sample disapproved of the idea of creating new faith schools. Perhaps, not surprisingly, a majority of the sample also opposed the building of the proposed new faith school at Westbrook Crescent in New Barnet.

The proportion of the sample opposing faith schools in general and opposing the building of the faith school at Westbrook Crescent was broadly similar. However not everyone who opposed faith schools in general opposed the building of the proposed faith school at Westbrook Crescent. Equally some who did not oppose faith schools in principle, opposed this one on the Westbrook Crescent site. These apparent anomalies deserve explanation.

Some, who in principle opposed the creation of new faith schools, were reluctant to oppose a specific community that wished to erect one in a given location.

“I just feel that it is not for me to oppose the wishes of another community if that is what they really want.”

“It is difficult to say ‘no’ because there are Church of England schools and Catholic ones and there is a history of Jewish ones too like the one that was in Camden. So I’m in between on this one, can’t say I’m for or against.”

“You don’t want to seem anti-Semitic.”

Equally some who vaguely or clearly supported the building of new faith schools, opposed the building of this particular school in the Westbrook Crescent location on the grounds of it being too big for the site, that it would result in too much traffic and parking congestion, and that it would damage the natural habitat by impinging on Hadley Wood and the Green Belt.

“I’m not against the school in principle and I’m not against faith schools in principle. But I oppose it (the proposed new faith school) because of the road and the bridge.”

The woods up there are special and need protecting. I like the Greenery in this area and I wouldn't have moved here if I'd known it was going to get so crowded."

"I'm against it because of the new road and the traffic, and I've written to the planning department to object to it."

"I'm against the size of this new school not the principle of building it. It's just that it is too big for the site."

"Oppose the building of such a school in that location because of the size and the traffic/transport and security implications, not because it is a Jewish school."

Amongst the majority of respondents who opposed the proposed new school at Westbrook Crescent, opposition to building new faith schools in principle remained at the centre of their view. However environmental and traffic considerations about the Westbrook Crescent site often strengthened opposition to the proposed school in that specific location.

"I'm against it on the basis of the road at Hadley Wood and the fact that it is a faith school and that it is double the capacity of the old school."

"You just know what is going to happen ... there will be lots of 4-wheel drives being driven into the area by harassed parents trying to get their youngsters to school. Because they will come from all over and they will have to use cars."

"I'm surprised they want to build it in a non-Jewish area and in such an inaccessible corner. The majority are bound to come from far away and its going to make our traffic problems and the parking even worse because they will have no option but to come here by car."

"I'm strongly opposed to this new school because of the Green Belt It's cutting through the Green Belt and park land and cutting up Hadley Wood."

"It is bussing people into an area they don't live in. It means more traffic and it doesn't build community. Our son is at Q.E. Boys and they bus lots in from miles away and that is why he has few local friends."

"I oppose the building of such a school in that location on the principle that it is too big for the immediate area. It has inadequate transport links so vehicle commute to/from

site will be greater. The new school replaces the old school that was 3 times smaller & used by local children who, the vast majority of which, walked – this huge increase of non-local pupils will be greatly felt throughout all of New Barnet and all routes in and out of East Barnet. ... Also, Barnet Council's determination to build (a road) on Metropolitan Open Space & violate the green chains of Hadley Woods and Pymmes Brook are an abomination and an 180' turnaround on all their environment pledges as well as the GLA's and national commitments to green spaces and the environment."

For some the environmental argument against the school was compounded by a concern about other developments that were also deemed likely to bring a lot of unnecessary traffic into the local area.

"I'm concerned that this area is losing its character. It has a nice village character at the moment with its own identity and local shops. If we get a big Asda we will lose some of that character and a Jewish school will do nothing for a sense of local community."

"The school should be a call to action because there are rumours afoot about the gas works and also the reclassification of office blocks into flats and the combination is nightmarish in terms of traffic. This road is getting worse with traffic all the time."

"There are too many parked vehicles and too many cars using the streets. ... These developments (Jcoss and Asda) are both detrimental to the well being of the people of New Barnet because they seek to draw motor traffic into the area from further afield (in the case of the JCoSS faith school very much further afield) without offering the community anything at all in exchange. JCoSS has the promise of 60 special needs places but that pales into insignificance against the projected increase in traffic movements for EN4, and the actual fall in levels of choice of school available to non-Jewish local people."

"There seems to be a culture in the Borough of Barnet for opting for corporate interests as opposed to creative forward thinking that would benefit the local community as a whole. Another supermarket will not enrich or nourish community and a school should bring the community together not segregate people."

It was notable that a minority, who seemed more informed about the potential new school, and to have thought more about it rather more, often tended to be more strongly opposed to it. Sometimes this stronger objections reflected additional considerations of which the majority of the sample were

unaware. A few respondents expressed concern that relocating all of East Barnet School to Chestnut Grove near Cat Hill would place some New Barnet residents outside the catchment area of a secondary school. This compounded a sense of unfairness and social exclusion. Some were also concerned that faith schools could in the long term change the character of the area in which they were situated by encouraging those who could send their children to such schools to move into the area. Hence there was a concern that faith schools would ultimately lead to ghettos and an increased level of separation between different communities. A small minority believed the school was a potential terrorist target that might endanger the local community in general.

“It’s disgusting that they are trying to build this school here. The schools round here for the locals need to be improved, and it is difficult for locals to find a good school. It’s pure PC madness to let people get away with this because it is so divisive. And it is such a big school. We will have 1500 vehicles every day coming round these roads.”

“We are going to be round the corner from this spanking new state of the art school which I’m sure will be very good and 90% of the locals are going to be excluded. Meanwhile my son is going to have to scratch around to find a school and maybe travel miles away. That is bound to create resentment.”

“Over time faith schools are going to draw people of that faith to the area, because given the choice they won’t want their children to travel miles. ... So it is going to create enclaves and I don’t see that is a good thing.”

“The security issue concerns me, because it means that anywhere the kids congregate, like New Barnet station, could be more dangerous.”

It was said that there was a natural rivalry between children going to different schools, which could sometimes spill over, into fights. Some felt that a perceived inequality in educational provision would lead to tension between local children and those going to the proposed new faith school.

“Kids fight at the best of times and now there will be bigger tensions because of Jcoss. It is very difficult to get into schools here and this new school doesn’t improve that situation for us ... unless we all convert!”

“I worry that there will be confrontation between local kids and Jewish kids. Because local kids may feel the school is unfair so local kids will feel they have a reason to cause trouble.”

The specifics of the Westbrook Crescent faith school debate caused some to see broader general problems about creating new such schools. Here some expressed concern that the creation of new faith schools would in itself lead to conflict between different communities.

“I fear that building these schools will lead to trouble, to tensions between communities, because no one is going to welcome one thousand plus cars going past their door to go to a school which the local community is excluded from. ... It doesn’t matter what religion it is. “

“It is pitting the rights of one community against another and it will encourage people to think selfishly.”

ATTITUDES TO A POTENTIAL ASDA AND THE GAS WORKS SITE

About three-quarters of the total sample were very quick to express opposition to the potential construction of a new supermarket or superstore on the site of the old gas works in New Barnet. This response emerged in some respondents' spontaneous comments, indicating that this issue was already quite prominent in some people's minds. The response also emerged when people were specifically asked their opinion on the potential construction of a supermarket/Asda on the gas works site. In the latter case most respondents seemed to have some prior inkling of a development of this type in that particular location, with some mentioning that they had heard rumours about it or read something in the papers.

"That's been on the cards for a couple of years hasn't it? I think I heard something in the papers but then I thought it was Tesco. But recently someone said it was Asda that was buying up the area. "

The very marked opposition to a supermarket/Asda on the gas works site reflected several concerns, and may have been quick to emerge because many people had had some time to consider this issue and the fate of this site. A central factor to this opposition was the belief that such a development would pull more traffic into the area, and hence contribute to congestion and environmental degradation. However interestingly, and surprisingly, this was often accompanied by the feeling that the area was sufficiently well served by the current range of supermarkets and similar stores.

"There's Sainsbury's and we don't need another superstore with all the increased traffic and litter."

"An Asda is crazy. An Asda needs arterial roads. It is not needed in a little area like this."

"There would be a lot more traffic and a lot of through traffic along this road and I'd object to it." (Crescent Road resident)

“I’m horrified that such a scheme is being considered – we have a very good Sainsbury’s (on East Barnet Road) with ample parking facilities which has served the area very well. Apparently there is an Asda in New Southgate, but I’ve never felt the need so would never go there. There is a Waitrose in High Barnet and a Tesco (on East Barnet Road), there is no need for another supermarket. Also I have not seen anything in the local paper about such a scheme. Those who live in the area should be notified and have a say in what is being planned.”

“I see no purpose in this - we already have a Sainsbury’s and Tesco Express in the immediate vicinity. Budgens is just down the road and Waitrose in High Barnet and Marks and Spencer in Whetstone. There is an Asda a 5 minute drive away in Southgate if one really must go there. Also the area is already very congested traffic wise with only one road leading in and out. The new store would severely affect our quality of life by introducing deliveries, lorries, and new consumers to the area.”

Hence there was a clear element of tiresomeness with supermarkets/retail in many people’s comments, perhaps reflecting negative publicity about large supermarket chains having too much power and influence with planning authorities and crushing competition. Some felt that the presence of an Asda would detrimentally impact on other small businesses in the area, and could ultimately result in a reduction in shop choice.

“We have plenty of access to shops. It might knock our Sainsbury’s and then it would close and we would have yet another contentious development.”

“If an Asda goes ahead then it will get used, and Asdas seem to sell everything which will result in shops on East Barnet road being pressurised. We’ll end up with no shops people walk to, and everyone driving into Asda.”

“There is Sainsbury’s already in New Barnet and if Asda follows aggressive marketing campaigns as always, (it will) start a price war to divide and conquer and subsequently monopolise residents grocery/household shopping. All residents of New Barnet will have to start objecting soon ... and tell local council no more supermarkets, no more roads and ... lower traffic and more buses for students and workers.”

“One just has to look at the impact of Asda in Southgate. It has taken the centre of Southgate 10 years to even begin to recover. There was a point for a number of years when it seemed as if every other store or business on the high street had

closed down and no-one dared take up the lease, leaving a defunct/dying High Street and a homogenised culture for shoppers.”

Those who supported the building of an Asda on the gas works site were, on reflection, also concerned by traffic issues.

“Asda would be good for me because it is cheap. ... But Asdas are big so there might be more traffic. But then there is so much traffic anyway would it make much difference?”

“Support the building of such a Superstore in that location providing it is accompanied by a reasonable and effective traffic management scheme.”

“I’ve no problem with Asda. It is nice and cheap. But the traffic would be bad wouldn’t it? And we’ve got Sainsbury’s and Tesco. ... What would be better would be a park with a venture playground. Something for youth and something to build the local community up.”

On being asked about a potential new Supermarket/Superstore on the gas works site, many spontaneously suggested other more community-oriented uses for the site, such as youth facilities or a sports centre. Spontaneous suggestions that the gas works site should be given over to community use and have facilities for youth can be seen to reflect a very widespread belief that New Barnet lacked such facilities. However the high number of respondents spontaneously suggesting such usage surprised the researcher.

“Another supermarket is just going to generate more traffic. Make something for kids instead. A sports centre and a youth centre.”

“A skate park for the youngsters would be good”

“Let’s do something good with that location – I’m not sure that spreading Walmart’s empire is a good way to promote local communities and the local economy and environment.”

“Another supermarket is not required in the area. A decent sports facility/ leisure complex would be fantastic though. We really need that here.”

The large number of suggestions that the gas works site should contain facilities for youth reflected a widespread concern about lack of youth facilities in the area. Here it should be noted that there was widespread concern about the behaviour of some groups of youths that tended to hang round Sainsbury's and adjacent roads. The behaviour of these youths was of widespread concern to locals, and particularly to many parents. Some of this perceived bad behaviour and even vandalism was attributed to the fact that there were no leisure facilities in the area for youth.

"There is precious little by way of out of school facilities and this has led to trouble with local teenagers."

"My children have experienced trouble with the gangs that hang round Sainsbury's."

"I blame the parents of some of those kids, but you also have to say that lack of youth facilities is a factor too."

"I'm concerned by the kids hanging round outside Sainsbury's. They can look menacing."

"There seem to be too few facilities for young people judging by the numbers of them hanging around on the streets and the amount of petty (but nonetheless annoying and distressing) vandalism going on. Now there is increased policing and cameras on the main road, the problem has spread into the small adjacent roads."

"Young people require local entertainment facilities. ... Because there has been so much trouble with local kids. There has been trouble on East Barnet Road and a couple of years ago there was a near riot in East Barnet village. Shop windows were smashed and bus stops ripped up. The youth club at Church Farm has been closed. The area is crying out for things for youth. ... So they could make use of the gas works. It might accommodate football pitches and things the community can use in more positive ways."

Some also noted that the location of the gas works site to public transport links, the shops in New Barnet and even to pubs would make it ideal for pedestrian, youth or educational facilities.

“It (Asda) would bring terrible chaos. And anyway, we’ve got enough supermarkets in the area. We need something for kids on that site. I’d like sports facilities at the gas works site. Barnet College wanted to go to the gas works site which would have been much better, but they were told by the Council they couldn’t.”

“ A college of some sort would do much more to regenerate the area.”

“The gas works is close to New Barnet station and the buses, so its good for something that pedestrians or young people would be attracted to, like something educational or sports. It would be a better place for the faith school cause it is not so tucked away and people could use public transport.”

“The gas works is convenient for pedestrians and people using public transport so why put a supermarket there that will only encourage people to fill up the boot of their cars?”

BARNET COUNCIL'S PERCEIVED APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT ISSUES AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Development Issues and Planning Applications

During door-to-door interviews people were asked whether they believed Barnet Council paid sufficient attention to the wishes of local residents in relation to new (building) developments within the area. This prompted several quite distinct forms of response. Some felt that they had insufficient experience of this area to comment. Many had direct, and often recent, experience of proposed small developments close to their home, e.g., building of a new house, conversion of a house into flats, extensions to property, building of a block of apartments, etc. Many such people praised the Barnet Planning Department for being helpful and responsive in relation to providing information and in taking note of their comments. Many claimed that proposed developments had been rejected or scaled down by the Planning Committee, and took this as clear evidence of responsiveness to their views. However some felt that they would like to see more widespread notification by letter in relation to such proposed developments. Here some mentioned that they had heard about proposed developments from immediate neighbours who had received letters from the Planning department while they had seemingly not qualified for such consultation in spite of feeling themselves to be close to the development.

“They (the planning department) were really nice and helpful. And in the end they turned it down (a proposal to demolish a bungalow and build two houses on the plot) on the grounds that the development would be too obtrusive.”

However in relation to more major developments, many respondents had a less favourable view of planning procedures and the Council. Here there was a suspicion that in relation to more major projects the Council was less keen to consult with locals and listen to their views. This was often attributed to the power of corporate money and influence, e.g., in the sense of

major development projects offering to fund something that helped the finances of the Council.

“I’m afraid that with the Council it is money that talks.”

“The views of a significant percentage of the population will not carry weight when it gets in the way of money. Money always wins.”

“A big organisation has influence and can get away with things. I think the Council is more strict with the small man, like when I wanted to put up an extension.”

This suspicion about big organisations and big developers can be regarded as natural in a world that is perceived to be controlled by large organisations and where ordinary people can feel increasingly marginalized. Moreover Barnet Council can itself be seen as a big and remote organisation. Hence it is easy for people to imagine that the Council is more inclined to impose its decisions on people, perhaps in consultation with other corporate bodies or influential organisations, than to listen to ordinary people.

“Do local people have much say? The Council decides and that is it.”

“All these decisions about the school all get decided in London somewhere and we get shafted. It’s not democracy. We just have decisions imposed on us.”

“People are not representing us as they should in a democracy. We didn’t get asked about the road or the bridge. The Council just imposed it.”

“The Council don’t really consult. They hide things away in tiny columns in a newspaper and then say they have informed the community. And they have no interest in Green spaces. ... The Council rely on people’s apathy to get away with things.”

In the light of ordinary people’s natural suspicion about large organisations in general, which can spill over into their perceptions of Barnet Council’s handling of major development projects, the Council might be well advised to explore ways to allay such concerns. More widespread consultation, and more open provision of information, including information

about the pressures imposed on the Council by central government, may help to ease this situation. Equally the Council should perhaps consider more imaginative ways of communicating with people, and how it can run local forums and consultations in a manner that gives ordinary people confidence in the Council's procedures, its openness with information, and its respect for the views of its council-tax paying electorate.

The Jcoss (Jewish faith school) application would seem to be a case in point. Amongst some who had been following this issue through letter writing, the local press, and meetings such as the Chipping Barnet Residents' Forums there was a distinct feeling that the Council was being less than forthcoming with information. Amongst such people there was a much more marked belief that the Council did not pay sufficient attention to the wishes of local residents.

"The Council say they did not insist on the new road and Jcoss say it wasn't them and so it goes back and forth and you can't get a straight answer."

"At the meeting (Chipping Barnet Residents' Forum) we were told there was no connection between the funding for rebuilding East Barnet School and the building of Jcoss, then the next day I get this letter from the local councillors saying that there is a direct connection. ... Naturally you get suspicious."

"The (Westbrook Crescent) site seems inappropriate for a school that size and with that much traffic. So why are the Council so keen to stick it there? It makes you feel suspicious. Surely there are sites with better public transport links and closer to where the kids are likely to come from?"

Local Democracy

Many of those who were interviewed indicated that they would like to see a greater measure of local democracy. This emerged in a variety of ways. When asked whether local people should have more say about the future of their area, the vast majority said 'yes'. When asked whether local residents

should organise themselves to be better informed about new developments in their area and better able to influence them, the vast majority again answered 'yes'. When asked whether they would like to be kept informed of future developments and of how local residents were trying to influence them, the vast majority again answered 'yes'.

The high proportion of respondents who offered up their e-mail addresses in order to receive the report of the research findings seemed to be indicative of a desire for more local information and more sense of community. But perhaps the most striking sign of a desire for more sense of community rested in the warm reception received by the researcher during door-to-door interviews. Many seemed pleased that someone was taking an interest in their views and that this might lead to them gaining more information on local issues and on the local mood. A couple of respondents spontaneously noted that traditional community had few means to help maintain and strengthen itself. Some spontaneously claimed that politics now failed to represent local communities. Hence it was said that while it was good that someone was conducting a research exercise of this kind, the Council would be unlikely to take any notice of the findings. It was also suggested that a website that allowed local people to suggest ideas and share information would be good for community spirit.

"The problem is that no one really represents the people round here. Politicians are supposed to represent local communities but we have all become very cynical about politicians."

"It's good that you are doing this. But whether the Council would take any notice, well, that's unlikely."

"I worry about the future of community in this country because what opportunity is there for people to build community? I mean in the sense of local community and for me that is what community should really be. People create their own communities like through a football club or a church, but that is self-selecting. But people don't talk to their neighbours. That makes local community weaker than it should be and it doesn't really have a proper voice."