

Application number: 2016/6088/P  
Highgate Newtown Community Centre Unit A, B, C,  
D & E 25 Bertram Street London N19 5DQ



## Highgate Newtown Community Centre planning application comments from Councillor Sian Berry, Highgate Ward, Green Party

Highgate residents have been discussing the future of the community centre site for many years.

The old building needs work to make it properly accessible and reduce its running costs, and now the Council has put in its planning application to demolish the building and replace it with 31 private homes and a new modern centre.

**I commend the process of consultation that took place up to last year, but have concerns about the process of development since option 4.4 was put forward and don't believe the final option that has been decided upon is the right choice for Highgate.**

The plans will take more than two years to be built, involve digging a huge basement for the sports hall, and the gains for the community are not clear except in public space terms. In particular, the new centre will hardly be any bigger than the current one, calling into question whether this is worth the trade-offs in other areas of planning policy.

**None of the new homes planned will be affordable, while three formerly affordable homes will be lost, and the implications of making an exception to planning policy for other sites should not be underestimated.** In design terms, the new buildings will be bigger and more imposing than what is on the site now. Inside the flats, layouts, windows, and room sizes have all been compromised in recent changes and it appears that some flats are not compliant with space and light standards. In addition, the works will involve the loss of garden space in other local homes. These issues were all raised in pre-application advice from the council, but have not been dealt with in this application.

**There are big risks involved in the current plans** and we'll have no local community centre while they are carried out. A very important question that must be considered here is whether a 'fit for purpose' community centre is able to be provided by other means than large scale redevelopment.

Far from being the only option available to the Council, if the current plans are refused, there is a good chance the current centre will be able to be refurbished over time, by raising funds through grants and possibly selling off the boarded-up caretaker's house to help pay.

### **Is this really a gain for Highgate?**

My view is that some aspects of the plans will be positive - opening up a way through this area that is an alternative to the tiny alleyway will be positive for Highgate Newtown as a whole, helping people to reach the new shops at Chester Balmore and the Library, and creating a pleasant, walkable link between the centre there and any new sports facilities at Mansfield Bowling Club that emerge from the planning row there.

However, the lack of a significant gain in community centre space and facilities, despite years of disruption, is a big concern. The scale of the work, including demolition and digging a large basement, introduces further risks to delivery, and the local area will be without a community centre during this time.

If the new community centre proposed were to be much larger, or could support new activities bringing large community benefits, the balance of costs, risks and benefits would feel a lot different. However, a lot of work has been done by HNCC's board during the evolution of the options simply to ensure the current level of provision in terms of space, storage and continuation of activities is possible.

By proposing no affordable housing, the applicants have potentially deprived the local area of 15 new affordable homes, and have guaranteed the certain loss of one social and two relatively affordable family homes. **The decision makers on this application have to ask whether the replacement (more or less like for like) of a community facility is sufficient to make up for this real and potential loss in terms of affordable housing, particularly when there are potentially viable alternatives to redevelopment.**

**Overall I think this current scheme is not the right one for Highgate and that refurbishment over time or a return to less disruptive options would be preferable and more acceptable to the local community.**

The two tables below set out how I believe the gains and losses stack up, and how the business case for the scheme compares in terms of risks, not just costs, with a phased refurbishment.

**Weighing up the balance:**

Negatives	Positives	Risks
Improvements brought by the reprovided community centre will be mainly qualitative rather than quantitative - it will end up only 21% bigger (increase from 1304 sqm to 1582 sqm) with no significant new facilities or spaces.	A new, modern community centre is provided to replace the current one. Running costs will be lower and it will be fully accessible.	Construction takes longer than the two years imagined.
There will be no affordable housing in the new development (compared with around 15 that should be provided according to planning rules). The plans also involve the loss of two relatively affordable homes, affecting local families who are not being offered a return to the site.	A pleasant new public space and route through the area are created, helping to knit Highgate Newtown more closely with the rest of Dartmouth Park.	Construction costs overrun, leading to a net loss and Council money being spent anyway, which could be spent less riskily on refurbishment over time.
The bulk and size of the new buildings is out of scale with the surrounding area. There will be a loss of light and views to some nearby homes and a high risk of intrusive overlooking.	New homes are created, helping to bring in new residents to the area, and make local businesses more viable with new customers.	Sales of private homes are not achieved at the prices estimated, causing a loss. (aspects of the interior design of the homes, and their relation to the alleyway are of great concern)
Nearby homes will lose garden space, in an area short of open and green space.		
Local people will suffer a long period for demolition and rebuilding, during which		

there will be no community centre at the site. There is no possibility of a phased development in the current option.		
Construction work will be extremely loud and disruptive to local residents in a very constrained site where this cannot be mitigated effectively.		

**Is demolition the only option, especially if refurbishment was phased?**

<b>Rough business case for total refurbishment*</b>		<b>Business case for demolish and rebuild option 5**</b>	
Net spending on community facilities (this is an estimate of the total refurb cost, but work could easily be done in stages with the most valuable improvements first)	£2.5 million	Net spending on community facilities	£3.8 million
Potential additional costs to facilitate project (principally project management costs if a longer term project is instigated)	£600,000	Additional costs to facilitate project (cost of building the new homes and public space, and project management)	£16.2 million
Total cost:	£3.1 million	Total cost:	£20 million
Sources of funds:  Sale of caretaker cottage (estimate in current state):  Grants from e.g. lottery funding, for energy saving improvements, crowdfunding (not unrealistic - see here for a single £3.8 million lottery grant to Lordship Rec in Tottenham: <a href="http://lordshiprec.org.uk/lordship-rec-wins-3-8million-lottery-grant/">http://lordshiprec.org.uk/lordship-rec-wins-3-8million-lottery-grant/</a> )  Capital contribution from S106 or profits elsewhere in the CIP. Equivalent to around 4 years of rent so could be provided from transition funds or reserves and recovered from expected higher rents in future.	£600,000  £1 million  £200,000	Sources of funds:  Sale of 31 private homes on the site:	£21.75 million
Total potential profit/deficit:	£-1.3 million	Total potential profit/deficit:	£+1.75 million
<b>Risks of lower profit/higher loss:</b>  Risk of not receiving grants is real, but this is a conservative estimate of what is possible with effort and good applications.  Refurbishment is not 'all in' so could be done in stages with bids made for specific improvements.	Real risk but manageable as project can be phased to mitigate delays in grants or subsidy from council.	<b>Risks of lower profit/higher loss:</b>  Council says the project needs this level of profit to be planned for because of the risk of loss, especially if there are delays.	A real risk, and can't be mitigated if problems arise once project has started.

\* Estimate based on scaling up £2 million of refurbishment costs estimated by Camden in 2011 – which was based only on a visual survey. Since then one of the boilers has already been replaced. Project management cost estimate via Camden officers.

\*\* Figures updated from Cabinet report Feb 2016 with advice from project manager. Option 5 has since been updated to give £1.95 million profit but no detailed business plan has been published so these are estimates obtained from officers. Original cabinet report and breakdown is here:

<http://democracy.camden.gov.uk/documents/s47916/14%20CIP%20HNCC%20FYA.pdf>

## **Planning policy - questions and objections:**

### **Social issues**

#### **Policies: CS6, DP2, DP3 (housing) CS5, CS10, DP15 (community facilities)**

There will be no affordable housing at all in the new development, despite the number of homes exceeding the planning policy limit for expecting on-site provision of affordable homes by three times.

In fact there is a quantitative loss of affordable housing, admitted by the planning statement for the scheme. Both flats being demolished are former 'right to buy' properties with one resident leaseholder and one private tenant family being charged a reasonable amount such that they cannot rehouse themselves locally at market rates.

If this very large concession to planning policy were made, the community would expect at least a substantial net benefit in terms of community centre size and facilities, but this is not being offered, with the new community centre space only 21% bigger with some issues remaining in how the space will be used and managed, and no significant new spaces or facilities added.

Extracts from planning statement:

*"3.4 At a local level, Core Strategy policy CS6 seeks to ensure high quality affordable housing is secured. Policy DP3 of the adopted Development Policies notes that the Council will expect all residential developments with a capacity for 10 or more additional dwellings to make a contribution to the supply of affordable housing. Policy DP3 states that the Council will negotiate the development of individual sites to seek the maximum reasonable amount of affordable housing on the basis of an affordable housing target of 50% of the total addition to housing floorspace on mixed use schemes.*

*"4.3 The financial viability of the scheme is the key driver behind the proposals, which has resulted in no affordable housing being provided. In particular, the core objective of the scheme to redevelop a fit- for-purpose community centre for the HNCC and the FYA will be paid for through the sales of the private homes. This has had an impact on the scheme being able to provide any affordable housing as it would result in the scheme being unviable.*

*"4.4 A Viability Report has been prepared by Savills in support of the planning application. In undertaking this assessment it is noted that, given the absence of any government funding for the scheme, the receipt from the proposed sale of the private housing is required to cross subsidise the community centre upgrades and other public realm improvements.*

#### **Key questions on affordable housing from planning statement:**

- **Is a 'fit for purpose' community centre able to be provided by other means than large scale redevelopment?**

- **Why is this scheme an exception when other mixed use schemes are still expected to provide the proportion of affordable housing in the target even when other facilities are added, and even if these are new - not just upgraded - facilities.**
- **Is the net gain in community facilities sufficient to mitigate the loss of potentially 15 affordable homes?**
- The comments below on the viability assessment from the Planning Statement (page 14)<sup>i</sup> seem to imply that even without £3.8 million being spent on the HNCC re-provision, a viable development providing affordable homes at Camden's target would be impossible on this site. This seems unlikely given the location and the fact the Chester Balmore development nearby (53 homes plus shops) meets the 50% target.

*"5.12 Savills' Viability Report confirms that the Residual Land Value generates a deficit against the Site Value Benchmark when adopting zero affordable housing units."*

## **Design issues**

### **Policies: CS4, DP25 (local area and surroundings) CS14, DP24 (landscaping and design)**

Camden's pre-application advice was that the most appropriate type and scale of building for this site was that of terraces, with heights to fit in with the height and bulk of the buildings either side.<sup>ii</sup> Many local residents have commented on how the form and height of block A, which is not continuous and split into two buildings, and the lack of alignment with Bertram Street from its irregular façade, are out of character and scale with the local area.

The exterior design of the buildings was reviewed by the design review panel,<sup>iii</sup> and though they were overall positive about this, they warned that surfaces changed abruptly in places and would need to be built with extreme care. They were concerned about the high concept for the designs, saying: "The panel would encourage the RCKA to consider how the complexity of the facades could relax slightly, to realise the design concept in a slightly simpler, more robust way."

In addition, the design review panel has strong concerns about the retention of the alleyway, which currently attracts antisocial behavior. The current alleyway is a valuable link, and in addition it is an ancient right of way. However, with the alternative route through the area provided by the new proposals, there is a big missed opportunity to reroute the right of way through the development and create a more rational design at the back of building A.

There may well be problems for residents of these new blocks, which will have been created by the applicant not taking this advice.

### **Policies: CS6, DP26 (quality and impact on neighbours)**

Despite design changes there is still a high risk of intrusive overlooking of local homes on Croftdown Road and the garden of the Pentad housing on Winscombe Street. The bulk and height of the buildings still risks loss of light and views to some homes, including the homes and gardens of the Pentad homes on Winscombe Street.

The need for an active frontage on the new courtyard has not been met. The pre-application advice received from Camden said that: "Ideally the living areas rather than the bedrooms of the ground/lower ground duplex units would adjoin the private external amenity spaces" but this advice has not been followed.

The community had been assured, following previous consultations, that because of concerns about overlooking to the rear, the homes in building A would be reconfigured in the designs sent

to planning. The proposal would be changed in order to place living/kitchen areas at the front facing the courtyard and bedrooms to the back. This does not appear to be the case in the latest designs, however.

In total only nine windows out of 31 on the front of building A facing the courtyard are active kitchen/living room windows. Within this number, four are on the faces of the building which point away from the main courtyard area at each end, leaving just five windows facing the courtyard in total. At the back of the building facing 118 Croftdown Road, a total of 16 windows out of 31 are active kitchen/living room windows.

According to the plans accompanying the application, the distribution of active windows breaks down as:

**Ground floor:**

- Facing courtyard – 2
- Overlooking 118 Croftdown - 6

**First floor:**

- Facing courtyard - 2
- Overlooking 118 Croftdown - 3

**Second floor:**

- Facing courtyard - 2
- Overlooking 118 Croftdown - 3

**Third floor:**

- Facing courtyard - 2
- Overlooking 118 Croftdown – 4

**Fourth floor:**

- Facing courtyard - 1
- Overlooking 118 Croftdown – 2

Internally, some of the homes within building A do not seem to have rational designs that would create desirable homes, and may not in placed comply with housing standards - for example:

- In one of the four bed homes a double bedroom is only able to be reached by walking through another double bedroom.
- The first floor 2-bed flats on either side of building A have very long kitchen/living areas with windows only at one end, with low levels of light and amenity for parts of this main room.
- Some of the bedrooms are extremely large and oddly shaped – up to 25 sqm.
- Four bedrooms on the first and second floors are cut off from exits by the kitchens, which raises concerns about fire safety.
- In some places kitchen units are placed across full-length windows.

In addition, the flat layouts on each floor do not line up vertically in terms of where utilities, boilers, bathrooms etc lie – only floors 1 and 2 have matched layouts in this way. Local architects are submitting further comments on this, and believe that it will increase the complexity of the building process, and could have long-term impacts for maintenance.

**Design review**

The design review panel's comments have now been placed on the council's website and don't appear to include a review of the internal layouts of the flats, only of the building's external appearance. I recommend that a further review is requested of the internal layouts, with comments sought on their compliance with standards as well as an assessment of whether these represent rational layouts for construction, good layouts for living, especially in terms of light, and overall whether these will indeed be good quality homes as claimed.

The panel's comments do focus heavily on the utility of the new public space, and suggest that there remain overlooking issues for building A at the Croftdown Road end, but they do not comment on the implications for the quality and safety of the courtyard if so few of the windows facing it are living spaces. The panel should also be asked to look again at this issue and provide comments.

### **Environmental issues**

#### **Policies: CS15 (parks, open spaces, biodiversity) DP24 (amenity space and landscaping)**

The proposals mean that nearby family homes will lose garden space, in an area short of open and green space. This is a significant negative point and any benefits of the scheme will need to be weighed carefully against this harm.

#### **Policies: CS13, DP22, DP23 (impact on flood risk, vulnerable uses in basements)**

The area close to this development is prone to incidences of ground water coming up through nearby roads and the course of the Fleet river is nearby. Any risks to the planned basement, and its effect on the surrounding area will need to be looked at carefully in the independent review of the Basement Impact Assessment. At the time of writing, this review has not yet been published and further comments may be submitted later.

### **Impact of construction**

The construction of any development on this site will have a high impact on the local area. This is exacerbated by the high density of the proposals and the decision to propose demolition of the existing community centre building rather than its retention and refurbishment, which was preferred by the community in early consultation.

#### **Policies: DP22 (demolition)**

I believe that options to retain and refurbish have not been adequately considered, especially in light of their lower impact on a very constrained site surrounded by many residential neighbours.

The level of construction work resulting from this decision will be very loud and disruptive to local residents in a place where this cannot be mitigated effectively.

#### **Policies: DP16 (transport impacts of construction)**

The draft Construction Management Plan proposes that the main construction route will be via Croftdown Road and pass by Brookfield School. If this route is chosen, then conditions should be attached, as set out below in my proposed conditions.

#### **CS5, CS10, DP15 (community facilities)**

There will be a long period for demolition and rebuilding, during which there will be no community centre provision at the site. There is no possibility of a phased development (where the new centre was built before the old one was decommissioned) in the current plans, compared with this being a real possibility in previous options.

### **If the development is approved, some conditions that are needed**

Finally, I would like to suggest some conditions that are placed on the development if it is given approval:

#### **Construction Management**

It is impossible on this site to mitigate completely the impact of construction, particularly when demolition is proposed, but these conditions should be imposed at the very minimum.

- Noise respite periods needed in the middle of the day.
- Air pollution monitoring (not currently mentioned in the draft CMP), with an instant shut down of the site when any dust levels are exceeded.
- Only the lowest emission transport and construction equipment to be used, including the cleanest possible on-site generators, avoiding diesel altogether
- Bankspeople provided for all trucks emerging from the site onto Croftdown Road, from Bertram Street and when passing by the school.
- Clearly visible temporary signage aimed at lorry drivers to beware of children.
- A very low speed limit for lorries on Croftdown Road (5mph).

### **Affordable housing**

For grants for the project to be sought from the Mayor of London's new Homes for Londoners funding streams.

If any profit is made then an overage condition should be attached for a number of the new flats to be brought into Camden's social lettings programme, their value being equal to the profit.

### **Internal layouts of flats relating to overlooking and life of courtyard**

These should be reviewed to make them simpler to build, and to switch more homes to face the courtyard with living areas rather than bedrooms. (I understand that a further application may be needed to have these new designs approved, which could also review the external appearance, as advised by the Design Panel.)

### **HNCC management**

A firm guarantee to be given to the current HNCC management organisation that they will be able to return to the site once construction is completed.

### **Councillor Sian Berry**

**December 2016**

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<sup>i</sup> Planning Statement

[camdocs.camden.gov.uk/webdrawer/webdrawer.dll/webdrawer/rec/6341798/view/](http://camdocs.camden.gov.uk/webdrawer/webdrawer.dll/webdrawer/rec/6341798/view/)

<sup>ii</sup> Pre-application advice

<http://camdocs.camden.gov.uk/webdrawer/webdrawer.dll/webdrawer/rec/6374593/view/>

<sup>iii</sup> Design panel review report

<http://camdocs.camden.gov.uk/webdrawer/webdrawer.dll/webdrawer/rec/6374608/view/>