

## **Your Residents' Association of Barnet candidates' view on the Council's recent New Barnet Town Centre Framework Consultation.**

The Council's recent New Barnet Town Centre Framework Consultation exemplified an attitude to local people and our area that your Residents Association of Barnet candidates wish to change. We regard the Council's consultation as disingenuous and a wasted opportunity for the following reasons:

### **1. The Consultation seemed to be organised with the intention of preventing local people from understanding or commenting on the Council's proposals.**

- Those who wished to participate in the consultation found it difficult to access the relevant information from Council documents. The Council's proposals appear to have been designed to confuse and mislead respondents. It was difficult for respondents to express meaningful views on proposals that lacked clarity and honesty. While the Council's scenarios and strategies used positive buzz words, their real meaning was often vague. They were also unnecessarily complex and muddled.
- The Consultation Feedback Form was poorly designed, confusing, and seemed to be designed to deter people from completing it fully or accurately. It attempted to focus respondents on the Council's muddled scenarios and strategies and hence deny them the opportunity to express their own thoughts and concerns. Ultimately it was difficult for a respondent to work out what aspects of the scenarios and strategies they were being asked to comment upon.
- The extent to which the Consultation required people to devote time to deciphering complex and confusing scenarios or strategies in order to answer relatively meaningless questions bordered on the abusive. Respondents were asked to waste their time for no good reason. A simpler consultation design could have covered the same issues, in a clearer and more straight-forward fashion, and produced more reliable results. The latter would also have been much less wasteful of respondents' time.

### **2. The Council's presentation and proposals revealed a clear agenda – namely to justify major new supermarket development in New Barnet.**

**3. In order to support this agenda the Council's proposals revealed a sustained bias.** For example, the option for residential development on both the Gasworks and Optex sites featured fewer positive words and was the only option

to include negative comment. By contrast the two scenarios that embraced significant new retail development were described in entirely positive terms. The clear implication was that if you want improvements to the area this must be accompanied by significant new retail development.

#### **4. In order to sustain this bias, the Council's proposals were in places misleading and deceptive.**

- Some of the claims about the current state of New Barnet seemed to be unduly bleak. For example, there is a much wider range of shops and eateries within about 900 metres of Sainsbury's than the Council's document acknowledges. Few residential areas have so much easy walking access to such a range of shops.
- Even the classification of New Barnet as a 'town centre' can be seen as a ploy to help justify major developments. A closer examination of the area suggests that New Barnet does not resemble a town in any conventional sense. Indeed the area that the Council's presentation charts regard as the centre of New Barnet can be seen to be rather arbitrary and illogical.
- The scenario for residential development only on both the Gasworks and Optex sites claimed that 'in the absence of considerable commercial development', any improvements to the area 'would require substantial public sector investment'. However major residential development on the Optex and Gasworks sites would constitute considerable commercial development and generate private sector funds for infrastructural improvements.
- Nowhere was there any reference to the increased traffic that would be caused by these major developments, which is known to be a key concern for local people and particularly in relation to an expanded retail sector.
- The claim that there is 'extensive car parking' in New Barnet will come as a surprise to those who live there. Again this appears to be a fanciful way of implying that the area is ripe for more intense retail development. However, aside from Sainsbury's car park, it is currently difficult to find parking space in the narrow roads close to the main shopping parades.
- Nowhere in Scenarios 2 or 3 was there reference to Asda, Tesco or Superstores to which people are known to be opposed: instead their presence was concealed behind leading and deceptive phrases such as 'a high quality retail-led mixed use development'.

#### **5. The Need for Honesty**

The Council knows full well that its desire for a new supermarket-led retail expansion is unpopular with the vast majority of residents in New Barnet. This seems to explain the disingenuous nature of its so-called Consultation.

It is the view of your Residents' Association of Barnet candidates that if the Council has genuine ideas for the development of the locality then these should be presented in an accessible, honest and balanced way so that local people can express their views on the future of the area. Instead we have a poorly designed, over-complex, manipulative exercise that seems unlikely to yield any meaningful results. It is the view of your Residents' Association of Barnet candidates that this reflects the Council's culture of arrogance and secrecy, and that this needs to change.

It is the view of your Residents' Association of Barnet candidates that the Council should treat local people with more respect and not be spending public money on a disingenuous and dishonest consultation. Public money should not be spent on trying to deceive the public. A consultation of this kind undermines faith in Barnet Council's Planning Department.