

THE BARNET SOCIETY

RESPONSE TO DRAFT PARKS & OPEN SPACES STRATEGY FOR BARNET 2016-26

INTRODUCTION

Barnet's green spaces are among its nicest assets, so the Barnet Society welcomes a Borough-wide Strategy for their maintenance and enhancement over the next ten years.

Since the Society was founded 70 years ago specifically to protect the Green Belt and other designated open lands in and around Chipping Barnet – which are now possibly under as great a threat now as then, due to pressure to build and relaxation of planning legislation – we are particularly keen that the proposed Strategy in no way weakens that protection.

The Council is commendably frank about being driven by the need to save £1.7m from its parks and open spaces budget between 2015 & 2020. This adds to our concern.

We are glad, therefore, that the draft document is so methodical and thorough. In fact it is a pleasant surprise that such a big study (running to 131 pages plus four appendices, and clearly the product of much effort) should be commissioned at a time of drastic Council cuts.

CONCERNS

However, we have some important concerns centring on the following issues:

1. the reliability of the Strategy's scoring of quality and value;
2. the detrimental implications for spaces assessed as 'low quality, low value';
3. unconvincing future management and funding options;
4. inadequate explanation of the investment opportunities identified;
5. the absence of detailed financial and organisational information on the various proposals; and
6. the absence of Area Action Plans, and the lack of opportunity to comment on them before they are adopted in May.

1. Scoring

We support the Green Flag criteria for assessing quality, and the broad definition of the value of parks and open spaces on page 16 of the Full Summary: a common framework is obviously necessary. But the criteria are unweighted so that, for example, heritage value scores only one point out of 18 possible (barely 5%) for value – and none for quality!

In short, the scoring gives a misleading impression of objectivity.

It cannot be right, for example, that Hadley Wood (misleadingly included under Monken Hadley Common) should be classified as low in both quality and value. It is a remarkable enclave of ancient and mainly indigenous woodland (the former Enfield Chase) miraculously preserved within London, and unique in Barnet. Not being owned by the Council, the Wood is unlikely to be affected by the Strategy; but it calls in question the reliability of the rankings.

The Strategy also takes no account of the many other Green Belt and other significant local green spaces bordering the 199 studied. For instance, the meadows along the Dollis Brook b917cf0ac06ab7b18a8ab81ff0bb8f544ad4fe1f02cf20bb83013a25130d0781

south and west of the Council-owned land around Barnet Playing Field greatly extend the natural scene, visually and environmentally, thus multiplying their value. Conversely, any development of Council-owned open space adjoining the Green Belt would have a disproportionately damaging impact on the latter.

We also note a discrepancy between the combined assessment spreadsheet and map. The latter shows Hadley Green as 'low quality, low value' and King George's Fields as 'low quality, high value'. Is this the wrong way round, or another example of fallible scoring?

2. 'Low quality, low value' spaces

The action proposed in Table 5.11 of the Strategy for 'low quality, low value' spaces is, "Enhance quality and value or *consider delivering outcomes through an alternative use*" (our italics). Since funds are unlikely to be found for the former, the latter causes us considerable concern.

In our area, spaces designated 'low quality, low value' include:

- Monken Hadley Common (& Wood)
- Byng Playing Fields
- Hadley Cricket outfield
- Hadley Highstone
- King George V Playing Fields
- Potters Lane Open Space (not listed, but on Combined Quality & Value map)
- Ravenscroft Gardens
- Rowley Green Nature Reserve
- The Tudor Golf Course

Development of most of these sites would be totally unacceptable to the Barnet Society.

Although we might not oppose some development of certain other sites, it would be extremely sensitive among local communities. We would require a convincing demonstration of the housing, educational or other need, and a thorough appraisal of alternative options, costs and benefits. Any resulting architectural and landscape schemes must be to the highest design and environmental standards, with adequate compensatory planting, amenity space and provision for wildlife.

3. Management and funding options

The Society's views on each option for future management and funding options (page 31 of the Full Summary) are summarised as follows:

- Retaining the status quo. Though often preferable, this is clearly not realistic in most cases.
- Shared public service. The precedent of Housing Association Maintenance Contracts, with their loss of control over cost and quality, is not reassuring.
- Third Party Contract Management. Essentially long-term outsourcing which, judging from Capita's performance in Barnet and elsewhere, is also unappealing.
- Social Enterprise/Partnerships. The idea is worthy, but it may be hard to attract sufficient volunteers (see below).
- Trusts and Foundations. Likely to work only for places of special interest.
- Precepts and Levies. In this time of budget cuts, residents may give greater priority to causes such as social care, police and libraries.

Section 4.4.5 of the Strategy considers volunteering as a potential resource, and Figure 4.9 shows High Barnet as an area where residents are very likely to volunteer to support green spaces. Our experience is that goodwill is already stretched. Recent calls for volunteers in aid of the Physic Well and Whittings Hill have attracted negligible response.

In our view, increased engagement will only come about if the community is involved from the start, and shares both the vision and the shaping of projects. Barnet Council's record in this respect (e.g. its recent dismissal of local opposition to the sale of Brookdene Nature Reserve) gives us no grounds for optimism.

4. Investment opportunities

The Strategy identifies areas which could attract lottery or sports investment such as Hadley Green and Barnet Playing Field. These are intriguing, but it's unclear what is proposed, or how probable is the funding. The costs quoted on page 29 of the Full Summary look precise, but according to Ruth Miller (on behalf of the Council) "as yet no feasibility studies have been undertaken on specific sites", so we wonder where the figures come from.

In the case of Hadley Green, uncertainty is compounded by Figure 9.1 – Major Investments Map, where the HLF site marked (in red) is actually King George's Fields. Whichever is meant, £2.2m seems generous for spaces that are reasonably maintained and well-loved as they are.

A better candidate for heritage funds might be Ravenscroft Gardens. With its frame of Arts & Crafts houses, this 1880s development exemplifies the commuter garden suburb ideal pioneered by Norman Shaw only a few years earlier at Bedford Park. Its typical Victorian mix of specimen trees, formal bedding and ponds has been sadly eroded, but its horticultural significance – unique in this part of Barnet – deserves better.

For Barnet Playing Field, is the Council also hoping for Department for Education funding? After all, the proposed academy site will be a tight fit for 1,890 pupils, and access to the Playing Field would ease that – but where will that leave local residents? Or will they have reciprocal access to the academy's extensive facilities for learning and leisure?

5. Financial and organisational details

We would want to see detailed financial and organisational details on each of the proposals, i.e. costing estimates for future years - both capital and revenue; the means/proportions by which these costing estimates will be met by the Council and/or outside funds; the proposed length of any future third party, trust, or foundation arrangements; and the means by which their effectiveness will be monitored and ensured.

6. Area Action Plans

For the Society and most Barnet residents, the crux of the Strategy is missing: Section 11, Area Action Plans. How investment in parks and open spaces will be effected across the borough – and which will be sold off or left to decline – is unstated.

Ruth Miller has stated that, "the action plans are being developed at the moment and will be made available after the consultation period with the final approved report. We will be taking all the consultation comments and incorporating them into the action plans. The final committee date is in May."

We understand the sense of awaiting the outcome of the present consultation before drafting action plans, but the plans themselves also need proper consultation – which won't be

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practicable before May. If the Area Action Plans come as a fait accompli, this consultation will be seen as largely a sham.

CONCLUSION

We accept that Chipping Barnet is fortunate in its green spaces. In principle it would be fair for more deprived, or soon-to-be-densified, parts of the Borough to get a greater share of the pot.

If some of our sites are being considered for sale or significant change of use, however, that is a completely different proposition – and one that we will oppose vigorously unless early, meaningful and ongoing consultation takes place, on both the principles and details of building and landscape design.