

Hampstead Neighbourhood Forum: Community Conversation

On 20 November 2014, the Hampstead Neighbourhood Forum presented the results of a consultation on a Vision document that had been circulated to all residents in its area. At a meeting held at the Hampstead Community Centre, about 60 people then discussed the aims and objectives expressed in the document. Participants rotated between tables so that they could each take part in three discussions. Below is a report on the discussions.

1. Homes & Heritage

Aim: Support Hampstead's future as a lively and contemporary London neighbourhood in an exceptional heritage area of picturesque streets, landmark buildings and historic terraces and houses.

Objectives:

A. Safeguard the qualities that make Hampstead a conservation area including pursuing high quality new design and rejecting poor design.

B. Conserve and foster the charm, human scale and sometimes quirky connectivity of Hampstead's buildings and spaces.

C. Ensure a balance of dwelling types to meet the needs of Hampstead's diverse community of professionals, families and older residents.

There was agreement that the most important priority was the review now under way of the Hampstead Conservation Area, which needed to be redefined, strengthened and, if necessary, expanded. Forum policy should aim to ensure the integrity of the heritage in tandem with revised Conservation Area policy.

There was considerable discussion around Objective A. Some felt that an effective design review and appeal process was needed. However, the determination as to what is and is not high quality design is subjective, and is therefore not taken into consideration by planners. An alternative suggestion was that planners should consider 'build quality'.

Some believed that new architecture and re-development should not be stifled, but others thought refurbishment should be prioritised over demolition. They said developers should be prevented from leaving buildings vacant, which then fall into disrepair – leading to them being knocked down and rebuilt in a new style. Could Camden force the landowner/developer to pay full business rates on vacant properties?

Some said planning officers should not be the decision makers and that Councillors, with the community, should have the ultimate say. Should a public consultation process be required before a planning application is submitted, or revised? Consultation should be improved during important planning applications, especially for large or controversial projects.

Questions included: regarding the Conservation Area, what are the gaps in current policies? What is left unprotected? How can the Forum – and the Heath & Hampstead Society – best support or strengthen the policies? There was some feeling that developers were exploiting loopholes in the scope and enforcement of the current document. This was leading to increasing instances of unwanted development – and to rising costs for the community in the time, effort and money needed to fight proposals. How can a revised Conservation Area policy reverse this trend? And how can the Neighbourhood Plan contribute?

There was a suggestion that 'view corridors' should be stated in the Forum's policies. In particular, those of the Heath already established by the Mayor of London; but also, new ones should be created to preserve views of the Heath from local streets. A related suggestion was that upward building should be restricted. New buildings should be in keeping with the scale of surrounding buildings. Maximum roof-lines, in the manner of existing policies on forward building lines, were suggested.

Regarding Objective C, it was felt important to have enough affordable housing and preserve a diverse community in Hampstead. It was recognised that private landlords cannot be forced

to let properties at below-market rates. But Camden is a big landlord. Could it play a larger role, for example through the transfer of property to housing associations /trusts rather than selling at market value?

The current balance between houses, terraces and flats was considered good, though another group felt that the area was too expensive for most families with young children; as a result, they tended to move out of the area to more affordable locations. Should the Forum devise policies on the conversion of offices/shops into housing, or on the conversion of flats back into single dwellings?

Basements, though not specifically mentioned in the Objectives, were a major concern. Residents thought basement developments and roof extensions should be more controlled, and more manageable for neighbours and the wider community.

- Suggestions included: basements should be restricted to the footprint of the existing house and should not extend under gardens; basement developments should have mandatory independent impact reports, including on structural stability of neighbouring homes, hydrology and tree-preservation, and these should be provided to neighbours and the community; basement developments must have consultation with the neighbourhood/community throughout the build process.
- One suggestion was to devise a 'Fair Basement Policy', a set procedural route that would provide a code of conduct through the application, development and construction process.
- It was suggested that Forum policy could stipulate that all builders working on significant alterations/building works should be part of the national 'Considerate Constructors Scheme', so that problems with noise, traffic disruption, safety issues, complaints could be mitigated before they arise or be properly dealt with if they do.

Regarding Objective B, It was strongly felt that streetscape quality needed to be preserved: current streets and buildings tell the 'story' of Hampstead's historic development; this should not be lost. Suggestions included: more heritage signposting; maps for 'heritage walks' available to buy at the Tube station/24 Bus terminus; an artistic fixed map on the wall outside the Tube station/near the 24 bus terminus as a feature.

2. Streets and movement

Aim: Reinforce Hampstead as a safe and walkable neighbourhood with access to amenities and good public transport, where residents have convenient alternatives to private car travel, while recognising the need for cars.

Objectives:

A. Where appropriate, prioritise the needs and demands of pedestrians and cyclists, the young and the elderly over general vehicular traffic, balancing the needs of all travellers.

B. Promote walking, cycling, and public amenity through high quality streetscape and urban design; focus on the quality and design of our walkways and roads through excellent engineering.

C. Improve air quality and safety by minimising traffic congestion.

Safety was thought to be an issue. More policing would help to keep schoolchildren safe when crossing the road. There was a call to enforce the 20mph speed limit more effectively. Cycle routes and lanes would also enhance safety. Faulty paving stones should be repaired regularly to avoid accidents.

Traffic congestion was an issue. It was thought heavy goods vehicles should be barred from Hampstead High Street and that there should be a weight and width restriction of vehicles, and perhaps time restrictions. However, some thought that additional parking areas should be

considered in the area. Different types of parking should be considered, and 30 minutes of free parking could be introduced.

Reorganisation of street arrangements around South End Green could open opportunities to improve the area. The triangle on the slip road at South End Green could be enhanced, shop frontages could have an uplift. Types of parking should be reviewed.

More Play Streets could be introduced, for example on a specific Sunday in the month for two or three hours. However, in another group, there were mixed views. One person commented that play streets were likely to be dangerous, while another noted that some existing play areas had not been successful.

Better integration between the Forum area's two centres could make it more cohesive, though each needs to preserve its own unique character.

3. Local economy

Aim: Create a lively and prosperous Hampstead economy that supports visitors as well as residents' needs, with support for neighbourhood shops, small enterprises, markets, and local job opportunities.

Objectives:

A. Recognise the tourist appeal of Hampstead and the Heath and ensure local shops, businesses and amenities better serve the needs of visitors.

B. Maintain and enhance the distinct character of Hampstead's two village centres – South End Green and Hampstead town – and encourage a broad retail mix to better serve the needs of local residents.

C. Improve provision of business services (e.g. printing shops, shared offices) and digital infrastructure (e.g. mobile connections and broadband) for the growing number of small enterprises, artists, writers, and professional freelancers working from home, cafés and small offices.

There was general consensus that there is not a good enough mix of shops in Hampstead village, though it was less easy to pin down exactly what was surplus or missing. The usual suspects were singled out: estate agents; phone shops; too many coffee shops; not enough food shops; no really good restaurants. One suggestion was to imagine the perfect high street, identify what is missing, and publicise this. The exercise could be reviewed annually. It is hard to get unity of views but there appears to be a consensus that there should be a mix of core businesses, predominantly focusing on shops that local people need and individual /niche shops that make it interesting to come to Hampstead.

There was discussion of how best to maintain a vibrant economic environment so that shops could stay in business. Offices above shops and people working at home or working in shared spaces create a lunchtime and early evening footfall in the High Street. So it should be harder to change use from office and community spaces to residential. The increase in permissible development changes should be resisted. There could be subsidised rates or rent for local people or start-ups to use empty office space, funded by Camden or other sources. Pop-up shops could be encouraged to fill empty spaces, while avoiding the 'tat'-type shops. Landlords and owners should be encouraged to be more transparent and available.

As shopping habits are changing, pick-up points for retailers such as Amazon or John Lewis could be located so as to encourage people into the village into the evening, who may stay in the village to eat or shop elsewhere. Also, shops could open later. More street markets could be held – though in another group, it was thought that these were primarily for non-residents.

Policy suggestions included: a task force for the High Street; consider Camden's existing policy for the mix of shops and possibly seek to go further.

Regarding Objective A, residents are not united. Some people are comfortable with

Hampstead as a hub for visitors, while a significant minority would prefer to prioritise local people. Those in the former camp favour providing information about local shops, walking routes, landmarks (such as blue plaques) and routes to the Heath. To encourage shoppers, some parking could be made free – half an hour is not enough. More areas for parking could be sought, fed by shuttle buses. There could be more frequent buses and a review of the bus routes for access to shops. To help new shops and businesses, there could be community schemes for fundraising.

4. Open space and Landscape

Aim: Protect and enhance Hampstead's landscape, from the Heath to its tree-lined streets, gardens and network of green spaces.

Objectives:

A. Identify Hampstead's network of green spaces and establish rigorous guidelines for enhancing their character.

B. Increase biodiversity and reduce surface water run-off by encouraging soft landscaping and discouraging extensively paved private gardens and public open spaces.

C. Extend the protection afforded to Hampstead Heath and surrounding designated Metropolitan Open Land to gardens and smaller open spaces and routes leading to the Heath.

The central imperatives identified were:

1. **Restrict and/or stop inappropriate development** that will detract from Hampstead's landscape: for example, building on green spaces such as Heath Strange Garden by the Royal Free Hospital. Stop violation of existing Metropolitan Open Land, for example the plan for dams on the ponds in the Heath.
2. **Protect green corridors** that run through private open spaces (e.g. the pressure lines of trees in back gardens that go back 600 years) to preserve flight paths of bats and habitats for birds. Enforce tree preservation orders.
3. **Educate on biodiversity** and inform residents about the impact of their role in the management of private open spaces. Remind them that we are collectively part of the community. For instance: discourage hard landscaping; remind or tell residents about tree felling and pruning, health of trees; biodiversity; encourage and stipulate the use of permeable paving.

Objective A:

- i) Persuade developers/estate agents/land owners to consider the consequences of development plans that impact not just views from the front of buildings but also views from behind. Generate awareness of the importance of 'distant views' in addition to the protection of local vistas
- ii) Educate residents and estate agents on tree preservation orders for Hampstead
- iii) Strengthen links between neighbourhood and Council waste management to improve waste collection
- iv) Enforce penalties for fly-tipping on public open spaces (see e.g. South End Green 24 bus terminus, fountain and station areas) and private open spaces (see e.g. Essex Court parking area, Willoughby Road)

Objective B:

- i) Create a Forum 'biodiversity/trees advisory service' to meet the needs of the local population regarding public and private open spaces.
- ii) Educate/Persuade developers/estate agents/land owners to think about biodiversity and green policies (e.g. proposal by the Royal Free to build on Hampstead Green)

- iii) Encourage and stipulate the use of permeable paving if residents create or replace tarmac on parking areas in their private open spaces.
- iv) Establish a local list of trees/pressure lines to be protected and encourage the retention of street trees and planting.

Objective C:

- i) Enable local residents to more easily maintain Council-owned open spaces by creating better links between Council and residents (see e.g. Holly Hill conservation volunteers).
- ii) Liaise with Council for better control (more collections) of rubbish and penalties for fly-tipping in both public and private open spaces

5. Building community

Aim: Keep alive Hampstead's local flavour and sense of belonging and loyalty by protecting and enhancing local community facilities and programmes.

Objectives:

A. Protect and enhance amenities, such as health centres, churches and pubs, for the community now and for the future by making the best use of existing facilities.

B. Strengthen cultural and community networks to enhance Hampstead's cherished village-like community character.

C. Retain the area's appeal to families by fostering a choice of good schools and family housing in a safe neighbourhood

Participants seemed to find it difficult to understand what building a community should mean, and what planning priorities could be useful in achieving this goal. Although the Forum area had a village-like look, this did not necessarily create a community.

Building a community appeared to involve improving or preserving amenities with appeal to those in various stages of life: children, working adults, families, and the elderly. Community facilities were broadly defined to include schools (public and private), churches, pubs, coffee houses and the community centre. Some persons thought that the conversion of any of these facilities to private residential development should not be allowed. One person commented that at a minimum, there should be a public consultation before any public amenity is converted to another use.

Since there were very few sites available for new development, there should be a keen focus on what happens when there is a proposal to replace or redevelop an existing community asset. Social/elderly housing and other public buildings should not be converted into private residential housing. Participants felt that for now the area already had several assisted housing facilities (such as Henderson Court), although there was likely to be increased demand. One person commented that rather than building new assisted living facilities, it would be better to encourage improved access (such as for wheelchairs and buggies) to existing housing stock.

There was extensive discussion of the effect of the area's numerous schools. Some people felt they created a nuisance, because of the traffic and noise they caused. However, it was also noted that schools were attracting young families to move into the area. Another comment was that commuters and delivery/service vans also caused traffic problems, and it was unfair to pick on schools and parents. One suggestion was a bus system to ease school-run congestion. This could help build community feeling.