

Mansfield Bowling Club development forum, October 1st 2014
Developers meet the public, mediated by Camden

(Report on proceedings by one attendee. Other versions may be available...)

Why Camden held this public meeting:

The purposes of a development forum, as stated on Camden's web site:

To enable local residents, businesses and organisations to comment on proposals at a time when developers are in the earliest position to consider them, to raise local awareness of a scheme at an early stage

To ensure more meaningful public involvement on proposed schemes rather than awaiting the formal consultation stage of an application when it is harder to influence changes in the scheme

Executive summary of proceedings:

Camden: "There are lots of conditions to be met before open space can be built on. Look at this huge list of rules and regs. Now, over to Generator."

Developers: "Look at these houses, aren't they nice?"

Public: "So, no indoor sports or leisure facility, after previous assertions about a gym and thriving bowls club, etc.?"

Developers: "There is no viable demand for any leisure use of the site."

Public: "Who have you asked?"

Developers: "A consultant did a study (different from the last one that got it wrong trying to prove that you lot want a gym). They are good at coming to conclusions that support whatever case we want to make and this time they decided there is no viable demand for leisure use of the site. We know best. No, you can't see the study, but look at these nice houses and flats, they are really nice and there are *lots* of them. Camden needs houses. No, we won't define whether affordable means ordinary people will be able to afford them."

Public: "What about the local schools, sports groups, venue-less bowls players, children's gymnastics, a soft play centre, Expressions dance studio, the activities that have to leave Highgate Newtown community centre and all the other people that could make good use of the site..."

Developers: "There is no viable demand for leisure use.
There is no viable demand for leisure use.
There is no viable demand for leisure use, but we're being unaccountably magnanimous (and ticking some stupid boxes in the planning regs) by using most of the remaining open space for a third tennis court for the private tennis club that you are free to join. If you pay to do so, that is."

Public: "But most of us don't play tennis. What about...?"

Developers: "You're wrong, you're wrong, you're wrong, we're right, you're wrong.
You should express humble gratitude that we're not trying to get away with more; if you don't shut up we could get nasty. And by the way, you're wrong, we're right. Dammit,

most of you are irritatingly unmalleable but we'll keep banging on saying the same things, ignoring your pointed, pertinent questions and eventually you'll see sense or give up.

For heaven's sake stop asking why is it necessary to make so much money from these houses and who is going to get it because we will not answer the question. Anyway, you know we'll get the money so stop trying to make us admit it. Isn't it obvious that we want the money because we're developers and greed is what we do and we don't care about anyone else; our role is to make money and bugger off to screw over some other people on the next job. Just forget about this open space thing, who cares? We don't.

We're off now, don't fret about the site looking untidy, the weeds will die down when winter sets in. The planning application procedure is just a formality, shout at us all you like we won't care. Back soon with the bulldozers, bye!"

Camden (*post-presentation, sotto voce*): "There are lots of conditions to be met before open space can be built on. Evidence of demand for leisure use of the indoor and outdoor facilities would not help their case..."

Some public: Should we find it?

Camden: Yes, send it to us, please.

Seriously....

The 'Development Management Forum' was a public open meeting organised and refereed by Camden's incredibly patient and scrupulously neutral senior planning officers. Jonathan Markwell set the scene by listing the various planning regulations applicable in this case (it was a long list), emphasising that the developers have to satisfy criteria to do with demand for leisure usage of the Mansfield Bowling Club site.

He also mentioned the site being registered as a Community Asset.

(This is a provision of the recent localism act, more usually applied to places like pubs and village shops to prevent them being turned into housing – the community has to be given first option to buy the registered asset when it comes up for sale. There is little experience of how this operates in practice because it is quite new and because this is open space, not a building; Camden seem not to have much familiarity in this area. From what I have read, councils accord differing weight to community asset status according to the circumstance – some have used it to prevent planning applications they don't want to approve and that have a lot of public opposition, combined with a decent prospect of the community being able to implement a more acceptable alternative. The thing with the MBC site is its value will depend entirely on whether it has residential planning permission. If it gets this it will be worth zillions and the community will not be able to raise the money. However, as non-developable land for leisure use only – its current status, which the developers and bowling club directors seek to change - it will be worth little. Hence the worth of denying any sort of residential planning permission – we need to concentrate on achieving this objective rather than waste energy and time on things like parking or the architecture of the proposed development.)

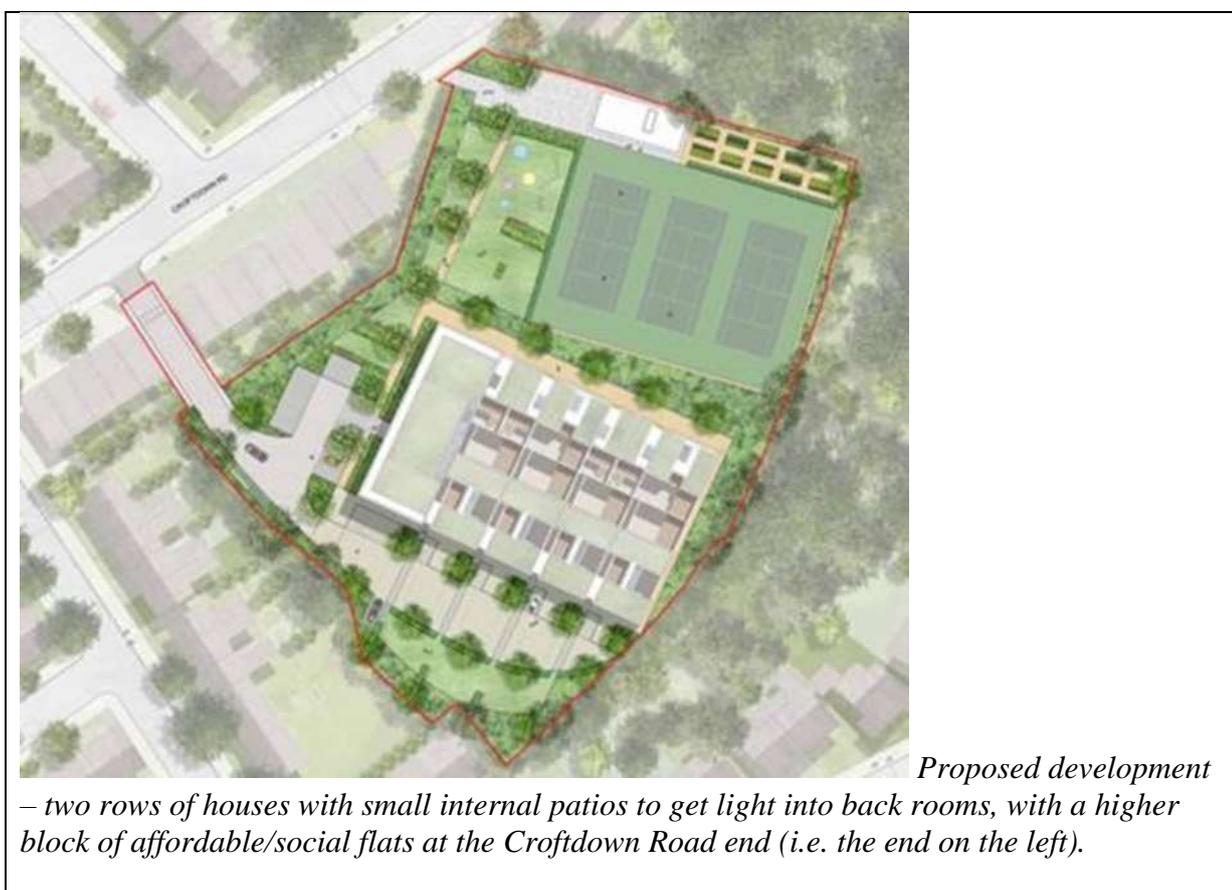
Then the architect from Generator, the developer, described at length the intricacies of his design for a block of houses and flats on the footprint of the bowling club building. He took a dim view of the negative feedback to the previous idea of splitting the ground area of the current building into two thin blocks running behind Laurier Road and Regency Lawn – true, it would be in line with what they call the urban grain, but it would also have corralled much of the open space and effectively turned it into private communal gardens, but he didn't think that was relevant to anything. One got the impression that those

who complained about his new design for getting 21 residential units into the footprint of the current clubhouse and bowling lanes had only themselves to blame if the houses came too close to their garden fences for comfort.

He had certainly thought about his task. His designs were clever; anywhere else they would have been fine.

Seeing the drawings projected onto a screen, people who may not have thought about what this housing would look like and how high it might be were alarmed by the proximity of first floor balconies looking over the fences at the end of their properties, with views into their back windows and gardens. They were not impressed greatly by the balconies being recessed to restrict the scope of their views, as if they looked straight ahead into one's own windows then there would be people looking in your living room or bedroom or down into the garden – the gardens and patios of Laurier Road, York Rise and Regency Lawn vary from small to tiny.

Frankly, the overlooking concerns would have been much the same if they had gone for the two blocks.



Emphasis was put on how the plan was of great benefit to the tennis club, giving them an extra court, enabling them to host competitions. Where the competitors would park was not really addressed. If the residents' cars were elsewhere the visitors would use some/all of the 21 parking spaces. The parking spaces not being allocated meant the free-for-all and resulting overspill would be the problem of the neighbouring streets, therefore no concern of the tennis club or Generator.

The 'pocket park' in the north-west of the site, where its corner meets Croftdown Road, would be tiny both in size, as a proportion of the site and as a proportion of the open space. Camden would not mow the lawn, cut the hedges or pick up litter - maintenance would be the financial responsibility of the residents of the houses and flats through their annual management fees. Whilst in theory the park would be open to the public, the wherewithal would be in place to keep out the non-paying riff-raff when the resident got

fed up with this arrangement – gates across the road entrance and a gate at the pedestrian entrance, where the old bowling green meets the road, would be easily locked. (If Goddard Place on Monnery Road is any guide, the clamour to keep them locked would be effective in about 18 months.)

A man in the audience piped up, saying he is also a property developer. Generator had made much of what they would be spending on renewing the tennis courts and building a new tennis clubhouse. His back of the envelope calculation worked out that the park and tennis court would be covered by the revenue from about 3,000 square feet of residential development. His question was why they needed to build over 30,000 square feet; who would benefit? They didn't answer, though the questions were put more than once.

There was also no response to the chairman of the Mansfield Neighbours group, also a member of the Kenlyn tennis club, who asked why – seeing as there was no imperative to build as many units as proposed - the third tennis court could not be positioned where part of the current building stands, i.e. use less of it for housing so that more open space would be public.

Generator's main argument, supported by some residents living around the site who are wary of anything that attracts children, young people or anyone not like them, was that what they propose could be a lot worse and everyone will just get used to it. I raised some of the issues that people would just have to get used to, such as increased pressure on over-subscribed local public services such as school places. Generator said it is Camden's problem – developers pay a sum to the council as part of getting permission to build, and how Camden spends it is up to them. That the schools cannot create more places because they do not have space was not their business, they said.

Parking was a major concern for some local residents. The development could house 80+ people in its 21 units. The parking spaces would be unallocated, to be used by residents, visitors, tennis club members and their guests on a first-come first-served basis at any given time. Even though private housing occupation density is usually lower than affordable and social units (the taller block, facing Regency Lawn), many thought a combination of households owning more than one car, residents' visitors plus tennis club users, that 80 people to 21 parking spaces would lead to cars parking in neighbouring roads. The development's distance to public transport and the resulting status of 'transport need' means Camden could not enforce it being car-free.

Several members of the public queried the developer's oft-repeated statement that there is no demand for leisure use of the site. Their qualifying descriptor was *viable* demand - a reasonable criterion of evaluation, but it also depends on where the definition of viability lies along a scale from merely requiring no public subsidy at one end through to profitable commercial concern at the other. Whilst one type of use may not operate throughout all opening hours and sustain a facility on its own, a multi-functional facility would bring together different uses throughout the day, together being viable.

A resident of Dartmouth Park Avenue whose garden backs on to the site said she had done her own study of demand for leisure use. She had photographed it every day over the summer, capturing the people using the open space of the old bowling green on every single day.

Councillor Oliver Lewis asked what attempts had been made to determine interest from the various local schools in using facilities on the site. "The public consultation events were open to anyone and schools could have attended if they had wanted to," was the reply before going on swiftly to the next question. After Oliver had left, I managed to get the roving microphone and informed the developers they had fallen into the pit of Oliver's trick question – as chair of governors of Brookfield school he knew damn well the school has not been contacted by the developers, and that consultation sessions have been held in school holidays when teachers would not be around to attend. No reply.

Throughout the evening, the developers kept saying there were lots of heads in the audience nodding in agreement with their ideas, implying the dissent was coming from an irrelevant minority. “There is always finger-pointing at developers,” he said, adding dismissively, “but we don’t care, we’re used to it – it’s water off a duck’s back.”

I made a final point that the nodding heads may not have thought about: I spoke to the manager of the closest estate agents and asked if there would be any impact upon house prices. In his opinion/experience, the value of the properties around the site would fall by 10%. That is £132,500 docked of the inheritance of the children and grandchildren of the retired residents of Regency Lawn. From my seat in the back I didn’t see many happily nodding heads in front of me.

Someone asked about timescales, because the site is getting untidy; would they do something about this whilst the planning process goes through its various stages. They said not to worry about it being untidy for much longer as the weeds will die down in the winter and their intention was to gain planning permission by the end of the year and start building at the start of 2015.

After the formal sessions ended, I spoke privately to Jonathan Markwell, whilst Keith Northrop talked to Stuart Minty, the Camden officer in charge of major developments. Mr Markwell told me Camden would be using an independent leisure industry consultant who has specific local knowledge to evaluate Generator’s evidence that there is no demand for leisure use of the site. He asked me to collate information from groups expressing interest in using a facility were there to be one, and send it to him now so the information is there to pass on to his evaluation consultant, rather than waiting for Generator to submit their official planning application.

Meanwhile, Mr Minty clarified to Keith Northrop that the developers need to evidence their claim of no demand for leisure use of both the indoor facility and the outside open space – it is not a foregone conclusion that the footprint of the existing building can be developed as residential dwellings.

Therefore, please can you let me know of any groups that could have a reasonable interest in using a sports hall, multi-purpose rooms and/or outside space – for not only sporting activities but any other leisure (sporting/cultural) usage of benefit to the community – and tell me how to contact them, or pass on my contact details?

Thank you,



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PS. Camden will send the official minutes of the meeting, inform you of any future meetings, the planning application when it is lodged and how to respond to it if you send your details to:

Dawn.Allot@camden.gov.uk

020 7974 1797

(say you wish to be put on the mailing list for the Mansfield Bowling Club development)