

Our Barnet residents' forum organised by the Barnet Alliance for Public Services on 4 October 2011

Minutes

These minutes were made by Ruth Kutner/Vicki Morris/Tirza Waisel. Corrections/comments c/o barnetalliance4publicservices@gmail.com. Thank you.

Approximately 50-60 people attended the meeting held at the Greek Cypriot Community Centre, 2 Britannia Road, London N12.

Alan Sloam made opening remarks on behalf of the Barnet Alliance for Public Services (BAPS) including brief introduction to BAPS. He thanked trade unions for taking action to defend public services, as well as their jobs. He mentioned our opposition to the One Barnet programme of outsourcing council services and the fact that no-one seems to understand it. "The emphasis of this meeting is on free speech: people should be free to say what they think." BAPS meets regularly from 6-8pm on Wednesday at the Greek Cypriot Community Centre, 2 Britannia Road, N12.

Julian Silverman described how BAPS came to organise tonight's forum, and how we advertised it via our newspaper *One Barnet*, and sent invitations to all councillors. He outlined the concept of the meeting: to allow people to bring forward their concerns, in a way that Barnet council's official residents' forums no longer do; to facilitate a discussion about solutions. The key points the council makes about One Barnet are things we want too (though perhaps understanding them differently!):

- A new relationship with citizens
- A relentless drive for efficiency
- A One-Barnet approach

Chairperson for the evening *Vicki Morris* (Barnet TUC publicity officer/vickim57 blog) invited contributions:

Discussion

Joe: We are being used as political 'animals' of the parties. We are not their servants, we are their masters. If we *do* have the Big Society, that suggests that we have a say. Let's have a referendum on One Barnet. Give us a say. Let the voters have a say.

Mr Ghosh: Now the editor of a newspaper and TV station. Concerned with disseminating information about how we maintain health and fitness in order to prevent strokes.

Roger Tichborne/Barnet Eye blog: Since he started writing his blog (3½ years ago) he has seen that we can change things through exposure and protest and challenges. We have achieved a lot already through campaigning – resident David Young, for example, did not just accept that sheltered housing wardens would be axed. He got a judicial review of the decision. Without taking sides on the issue, I would like to remind you that turning Mill Hill Garden Centre into a school has been halted for now as the council did not follow their own correct procedures. Holding the councillors to account does make a difference.

Investigating and letting the bloggers know if you have any issues you want followed up on or publicised is an effective way of challenging the council.

Maria Nash: Congratulations to everyone for organising this event. It is good to have a democratic space. How can we engage with more people? Not everyone can attend meetings and not everyone has access to the internet. I am concerned about Barnet's 'fairer contributions' policy: how will the process be carried out? People who are concerned about this need to engage, not necessarily by coming to meetings; people with learning disabilities are affected by it: how will they be heard?

Catherine McAnulty: representing Middlesex University Unison branch who have been on strike today (4 Oct), alongside academic staff in the UCU union. The university plans to cut 300 staff, which will affect students' experience. Middlesex Uni brings a lot of money to Barnet. If more and more of its activity – eg, administration – is outsourced outside the borough (currently to India) it will also harm Barnet residents. Already students' first point of contact is not in a face-to-face meeting, even at admissions.

Linda Edwards: my daughter has autism and receives care. Recently her social worker reassured us that her care package would not be reduced; but at very short notice it was completely removed. We were only able to oppose that through resorting to a lawyer. Other services are also being cut.

Andrew Dismore: some advice to BAPS: keep it simple. You risk dissipating your energies if you try to do too many things. It is important to choose your fights. You are concentrating on One Barnet, the NHS; don't miss other cuts, eg, police, that are concerning people. I have personal experience from Westminster council of the sell-off of the cemeteries. A campaign by relatives forced the councils to buy the cemeteries back. A similar campaign here is one we can win. NHS: we need to get organised on that, but by supplying information, winning the debates – and getting votes in the ballot box – we can win on it.

Robin Bishop: we don't usually get the chance to debate the environment. My question is: "The Government is transforming the planning system. In future, local people are to be more involved, and any planning application must be approved unless the local plan prevents it, or its location and design is unsustainable. How does Barnet Council propose to involve local communities, and how will it be able to update and enforce its plan when our planning and building control departments are being outsourced?"

Vicki Morris: replying to Andrew Dismore. We try to build on real, existing campaigns, so as to sustain and grow BAPS. We might end up campaigning on things we didn't expect to campaign on – such as Controlled Parking Zone charges, but that is a real, living campaign. It raises wider issues about how Barnet council imposes change and also about how it is raising charges where it can, eg, adult social care. In a lot of the areas where we would like to do more work, eg, NHS, young people,

bodies are wary of working with us, because a lot of them rely on the council for resources. We have to build relationships of trust.

John Sullivan: [full notes of Mr Sullivan's contribution can be viewed on this website soon.] I am not a trade unionist; I do not belong to a political party, and never have. I am a Barnet resident and the father of a 48-year-old daughter with learning disabilities, one of those currently being described by Councillor Brian Coleman as 'these people'. The council denies free speech. The way the council is currently run can be likened to Gaddafi's administration.

Services for disabled people have been disrupted by cuts. Condemns the unfair 'fairer contributions' policy, and the lack of meaningful consultation over it. It complies with the law but is not moral. The LBB's purpose is to maximise 'take' (income) and minimise services. There is a rush to outsource care and support services that harms those services. We have set up the Campaign Against the Destruction of Disabled Support Services (CADDSS1@gmail.com) to fight the rise in charges. My questions are: "1. Can we have an open forum for disabled people and carers? 2. Can the council be forced to distribute the CADDSS survey form at its venues?"

Julian Silverman: John has given a partial answer to Maria's question: we can organise forums for disabled people and their carers at the places they use. People at those meetings could elect representatives/delegates to attend BAPS meetings.

Linda Edwards: My daughter has a solicitor. What about people who don't have access to that? Barnet council are contravening their own strategy for carers – they are supposed to be supporting and valuing carers. There is no representation and no consultation.

Helen Davies: representing Barnet trades council and Barnet Unison. The union is very keen to work with CADDSS. Reply to Andrew Dismore: One Barnet is an appropriate focus for BAPS, even health is coming under its remit more and more. We are an open campaign: anyone can bring their issues and their experiences. Why doesn't the Director of Social Services – who has all the data on care – rebuff Cllr Coleman? I want to flag up the looming pensions battle: this is something that affects large numbers of people and a united fight over it represents the sort of united fightback we have been looking for on other issues. The councillors, government, heads of industry all get their pensions. Why not the workers? Support the pensions campaign.

Paul Edwards: worked for Barnet council. Wrote to Cllr Thomas about One Barnet who did not answer his question but told him to put in a Freedom of Information request. The questions he asked were: "Will service delivery remain in Barnet after outsourcing? Has the council assessed the impact on the local economy if outsourcing means jobs moving out of the borough?" Right now 1,000 jobs (in the council and at Middlesex University) are threatened in the borough. The council has a duty to stimulate the local economy and it is failing in that.

Alan Sloam: please, everyone, come to our meetings and invite us to come and speak at your meetings.

Tirza Waisel: CADDSS is carrying out a survey into the effects on people who use adult social services of the increase in charges. Please take a form and fill it in, distribute forms. We want real-life examples of the impact. Thanks BAPS and trade unions for their help in getting CADDSS off the ground. She has raised the issue with the council of the impact of its decision to raise charges to Finchley Festival for using Victoria Park, which forced them to cancel their festival. And of putting

council resources into a fun fair, which is not accessible to elderly and disabled people – the council has not replied. Endorses the observation that there is a culture of intimidation in Barnet. We know that voluntary sector organisations are intimidated from getting involved with BAPS openly because they are scared of jeopardising their financial support from the council. BAPS does not get money from the council and wouldn't want to get money from the council; we are independent and can be more outspoken.

Kim Lee: active with Save Friern Barnet Library campaign. Three libraries face closure (Friern Barnet, North Finchley, Garden Suburb); the council's claims to be having detailed talks about replacement venues – Arts Depot, the Institute – are false. There have been no meetings with the Arts Depot, no meetings with the Institute. Save Friern Barnet Library campaign's next event is at 2pm, on Saturday 15 October.

John Burgess: trade unions need to work in the community, I'm glad we are doing that. Residents are starting to find their voice, and that is why the council is closing down the forums for them to express what they think. People still need to go to and use the official council residents' forums. What is One Barnet? The sell-off of council services. We have another Unison strike of the workers affected first by outsourcing, on Tuesday 18 October. Unison members who distributed the *Our Barnet* newspaper around the borough on 13 September were shocked to find out how little residents knew about One Barnet. We need to get the message out to more people. Invites people to get involved with a documentary film Barnet Unison is making. The company that is trying to bypass the planning process in one local development in Barnet (Capita) is also bidding to run it! Shows the problems of outsourcing such services as planning and regulation.

Roger Tichborne: One Barnet Board: another member of that body is Tom Nathan, the manager of Brent Cross shopping centre.

Alison Moore: I am the Labour leader of the opposition on Barnet council. Perhaps it is true that there are a few wealthy residents of wards such as Totteridge who only care whether their bin is emptied on time, but most Barnet residents will be shocked when they go to use the various services and find out they are not what they expected. One Barnet is mainly an ideological project; the options appraisals have already decided in advance that privatisation is the route to go down. If outsourcing fails, it will be residents who foot the bill as well as suffering from worse services. The examples of the small outsourcings that have been done already do not bode well. Even councillors cannot get answers from the private companies. The council's procurement service is not fit for purpose as the MetPro scandal revealed. We have got to make sure that people across Barnet know the implications of One Barnet programme.

Shereen Pandit: People have spoken about intimidation; that extends to the way we are treated at the democratic meetings of the council. BAPS' method of protesting is to inform people about what is going on; Unison's way of protesting is to take industrial action. Residents' method can be to attend council meetings and hold elected representatives to account. We can and must do that in spite of the increasing number of security guards and even police who are brought to intimidate us from speaking. Unison workers were locked out of their workplace because they had decided to strike. We live in one of the world's oldest democracies: don't grumble among yourselves if you think something is wrong, take your protest to the council meetings. Let them explain what they're doing with our money.

John Dix/Mr Reasonable blog: Procedures are a problem. We don't need to reinvent the wheel, though. Perhaps BAPS, which already has experience, could produce an easy guide on how to ask questions. They could also provide a guidance and facilitation role e.g. how to find answers, where to get leaflets printed cheaply, for example. One Barnet reports are garbage. We need more real-life cases of how measures are affecting people. Forget ideology; when it affects them directly, that is when it starts to hit home to people. Don't refer to "the council"; the council is made up of councillors. Concentrate on a few individual councillors who are vulnerable to pressure. Ask direct questions and insist on answers. Scrutinise those who make the decisions.

Adam Langleben: the GLA election will be important; if the Conservatives lose the Barnet and Camden seat it will deal them a blow.

Derek Sagar: I am involved in a residents' association in the north of the borough. I want to know how the One Barnet Board is constituted.

Alison Moore: the main work is done by Barnet council officers [staff]. It is a technical body. Cabinet members make the decisions in private meetings (not open).

Derek Dishman/Mr Mustard blog: I can put the minutes of the One Barnet Board meetings on my blog if people want to see them.

Andrew Dismore: Do keep going to the residents' forums. The range of topics you are allowed to discuss is narrow, but by being imaginative, framing your questions so that they mention those topics, you can still talk about other topics. There were many people at the last Area Forum: they are still important bodies for holding council to account. Pensions: vast disparity in what people are paid, eg, former chief executive officer compared to a refuse collector. A pension of £75,000 is 25 times a refuse collector's pension.

Mr Ghosh: I was prevented from attending the 1st March council meeting by police and security guards.

Julian Silverman: Questions idea that private sector is more efficient than public sector; and asks why councils should not 'go into business', eg, running commercial projects to benefit all residents rather than private companies.

Alan Sloam: concluding remarks. Have people found the forum useful? Would they like more of them? [A show of hands was unanimous for more 'Our Barnet' forums, and in different parts of the borough.] Appeal for funds.

Meeting concluded

UPDATE: The next "Our Barnet" Residents Forum will be on Tuesday 29 November and will be held in Edgware.