

Politics of the basements

□ CAMDEN Council, over the next few weeks, as part of its revision of its planning policies and guidelines, has the opportunity to demonstrate that it is serious in helping residents in their opposition to basement applications; by adopting the proposal of Camden's Residents Association Action Committee (group of over 30 residents associations and groups formed over concerns with basement developments) that construction and engineering issues should be resolved prior to determination, unlike at

present when far too often permission is granted subject to these items being left to be dealt with in a basement

construction plan and/or in an agreement with the applicant under Section 106 of the planning act.

In practice it is extremely difficult then for local residents to have any say or control to ensure these issues are dealt with properly.

The existing guidelines might sound sufficient that "basement development will only be permitted once it has been demonstrated that the proposal would not cause harm to neighbouring properties"; but time and time again these fine words have been rendered

meaningless by the councillors and planners when faced with well-funded and connected applicants consistently ignoring the engineers' reports obtained by residents, often at considerable expense, and instead taking the easy course of granting conditional permissions.

This change should help Camden in resisting appeals to the planning inspector from such applicants.

In January neighbours of the Hall School, the exclusive prep school, in Crossfield Road, Belsize Park, were the latest to suffer from this when the planning committee approved its application for a £20million two- to

three-year redevelopment project involving the demolition and rebuilding of its site with a new double basement; despite opposition from the Belsize Residents Association, the Belsize and Camden Conservation Area Advisory Committees as well as the 120 or so residents who had joined the Hall School Opposition Group.

Apart from the school, all of Crossfield Road is wholly residential, but the councillors were prepared to accept the planning officer's comments that the policy ban on double basements was aimed at domestic developments, so an exception could be made for the school.

The minutes of the

planning committee hearing state that according to Camden's consultants "this would not be a straightforward basement construction and therefore the acceptability of the basement construction was dependant on the construction technique and materials employed. As the contractor would have considerable say on those methods and the sequencing a definite assessment of the ground movement at this stage was not possible."

Despite these reservations the committee was still prepared to accept the officer's recommendation that although these issues could not be settled in

advance of permission being granted they could be resolved through a basement construction plan secured through the Section 106 agreement.

The committee also chose to disregard the written submission for the Hall School Opposition Group with regard to the procedural irregularities it felt had occurred with its

experts' reports having been ignored in Camden's consultants' reports, and being given much less scope to make comments in comparison with the attention given to the applicants; and the request for an adjournment to ensure that their reports could be fully considered.

ANTHONY KAY

Hall School Opposition Group