

VIEW FROM THE STREET

by Peter Symonds, Chair of The Combined
Residents' Associations of South Hampstead



Case proves that basements policy remains deficient

At a recent Development Control Committee meeting the approval of a basement under a studio flat in a house in Greencroft Gardens, where one half of the ground floor had already endured extensive excavation works, demonstrated yet again the troubling deficiencies inherent in Camden's current basement planning policy. These have in no way been ameliorated by the appointment of Campbell Reith, Camden's new independent assessors, whose review of this contentious application admitted there are flaws in the Basement Impact Assessment, and accepted that the chance the property might have been structurally damaged by earlier basement excavations could not be ruled out.

Since there had been no investigations in this respect they were unable to confirm that foundations and wall structures were sound or reliable. Yet instead of counselling that such a serious concern be properly examined and pre-determined before any decision was made, Campbell Reith, merely suggested it be covered by a Section 106 – a common fudge by which councils make what is unacceptable in planning terms, acceptable – thereby encouraging councillors to approve the application.

Worryingly, this was not the only shortcoming in their report. It referred repeatedly to the precedent set by the 2011 permission for the existing basement as a reason the new application should be approved. This was incorrect.

that the three-metre high by five-metre long side wall of the new extension, which will abut and loom over the adjoining house, will have little or no effect on the lives of neighbours was, quite simply, disingenuous.

It will block their light and corral them into a small, sunless patio. It was also untrue to claim they had been unable to gain access to investigate the likely effects of the proposal on the neighbouring property. No request to inspect was ever made by Campbell Reith or anyone else. Given the history of the property and neighbours' understandable concerns, such an inspection was surely vital, particularly as ground water flows had, in the past, caused the existing basement to flood.

Contrary to Camden's own Planning Guidance 4, no monitoring of groundwater measurements was carried out: of itself, reason enough for considerable caution.

There is currently a perception that unfairness lays at the heart of Camden's current planning process. The appointment of an independent assessor does nothing to mitigate that impression if, as was the case here, serious concerns are disregarded and assessments are made which appear to favour the developer at the expense of neighbours.

Camden's insistence that Campbell Reith consider only technical objections raised by a qualified engineer on behalf of residents compounds that unfairness by discriminating against neighbours who may not have the resources to pay for professional advice, even when

This was incorrect.
That permission was not for a new excavation but a modest deepening of a basement installed in 1991, and a revamping of an existing garden extension. Those alterations increased the living area by 25 per cent, and stayed entirely within the footprint of the house. This latest development, aside from putting an already vulnerable building under further stress, will increase the living space by 150pc and excavate a second basement way out under the garden.
To state, as Campbell Reith did,

professional advice, even when some are technically competent enough to articulate such objections themselves.
Our council trumpeted the appointment of this independent assessor as the means by which fairer, more technically informed and responsible planning decisions would be made. Campbell Reith's flawed report and DCC members' consequent decision to approve this application demonstrates beyond doubt that Camden's current basement planning process is still far from fit for purpose.