

Secret plan to develop inner city allotments

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Tenants of Cecil Avenue allotments in Great Horton are celebrating after forcing Bradford Council to back down on secret plans to redevelop their site for housing.

But the Council's commitment to green spaces and biodiversity within the inner-city remains in question. Whilst national Government speaks of allotments as the 'lungs' of the urban environment, Bradford Council plans to perform life threatening surgery in a modern day 'organs for cash' operation!

As part of its review of the City's Unitary Development Plan (UDP) in which land is designated for particular use, senior council officers have identified the historic Cecil Avenue Allotments as ideal for housing development.

The secret plans completely contradict national Government policy on preservation of allotment sites and the recently launched Local Government Associations guidelines.



Allotment tenants remained unaware of these plans until they received notice of a 'Special Neighbourhood Forum' scheduled for 19th September. In the council leaflet, printed only in English, tenants were invited to attend and let Council officers **"hear your views on the future requirements of Cecil Avenue Allotments"**. This was the only agenda item listed and no mention was made of the radical plans to bulldoze half the site!

Around twenty tenants attended the 'forum' at the Elderly Day Centre on Great Horton Road and shock was quickly followed by outrage as soon as the real purpose of the meeting became clear. Julia, an allotment holder for seven years, told KDIS that the advertised opportunity for tenants to question officers was a hollow promise;

"I arrived at the meeting, along with everyone else expecting a general discussion about the site

*Special Neighbourhood Forum
meeting - no mention of
housing*

and how the council could help us. From the start it was clear that we were the ones expected to listen, while council officers gave us a prepared presentation. I was furious."

Melvyn Jagger, Senior Property Services Officer, presented the detailed Council plans involving the construction of a new access road and the building of thirty-three new 3/4 bedroom homes on the western half of the site. Just how advanced these proposals were was graphically underlined when copies of the architects drawings were handed out. Some tenants walked out of the meeting there and then.

Shabir Mohammed, the Council's Housing Association Liaison Officer then explained that the proposals were a consequence of new funding becoming available from Central Government. Bradford was being encouraged to work with housing associations in the development of new housing projects and Cecil Avenue Allotments was a prime site.



Detailed plans showing half the site under housing

This provided an opportunity, argued Jagger, to redevelop the site for the benefit of everyone. New houses could be provided in an area short of available land, releasing money to improve security on the remaining allotments by installing perimeter fencing. But as another tenant explained to KDIS;

"The site does have real problems with low usage, I wouldn't try and deny that. But not only were the Council trying to impose their solution on us they now had the audacity to tell us what our problems were, and perimeter security just isn't one of them."

Some at the meeting began to smell a rat.

For years the Cecil Avenue Tenant Association has struggled to get the Council to properly promote the site locally. KDIS was told that requests to the Allotment Officer for assistance in producing, translating and funding mailouts, leaflets, display boards etc. were received sympathetically but that they were always told there were no funds to help.

Was Cecil Avenue Allotments being cynically run down to free up land for development? It was a

genuine concern that had been addressed two years earlier by Angela Eagle, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment;

"...we are going to ensure in future... that local authorities have actually actively promoted their allotments; so that we can get round the idea that local authorities may deliberately be allowing land to get derelict so that they can then dispose of it. Therefore, one of the new criteria is that we will ask Government offices to look, when they are looking at applications for disposal, at whether there has been an active promotion of the allotments. We hope this will get round any fears that local authorities may be acting as judge and jury and not actively promoting allotments."

Certainly the Council could reasonably be accused of being judge and jury in this case! There had been no consultation in evaluating either the problems of the allotment site or their appropriate resolution. It was hardly surprising that following the Council's presentation officers were met with a barrage of questions and angry comment.

- was the area not already densely populated?
- was there really no other vacant land?
- why was the land-search centered on a half-mile radius of the allotment?
- what had been done to involve the ethnic minorities on the site?
- why was only one alternative for regenerating half the site being presented?
- why not renovate the existing housing stock?

The Council Officers were left in no doubt as to the depth of feeling, what was surprising was that they seemed genuinely taken aback by the unanimity of opposition. If they had expected an easy ride they were to be in for a shock!

Anger turned to determination as the tenants, meeting at the Council for Mosques on Great Horton Road, prepared to organise opposition to the plans. A leaflet was produced and distributed amongst other tenants and local residents who were able to offer additional information. The site, it appeared had been placed in 'trust' by a Sir Francis Sharp-Powell **"for the benefit of the people of Great Horton"**. Was the Council even entitled to change the use of the land!

Further to this, it was discovered that the allotments had been designated as a 'Third Tier Nature Conservation Site' five years ago because of the diversity of species present. This supported the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners findings that;

"... allotment garden plots and allotment garden sites have on average up to 30 per cent higher species diversity than urban parks, and hence are ecologically more valuable."

The fight for Cecil Avenue Allotments is about much more than tenant versus developer. The Council's commitment to green spaces and biodiversity within the inner-city was at issue. Whilst national Government spoke of allotments as the 'lungs' of the urban environment, Bradford Council planned to perform life threatening surgery in a modern day 'organs for cash' operation!

Tensions were running high as over thirty allotment holders and supporting residents took their seats at the Neighbourhood Forum at the Council for Mosques on 12th October. The minutes of the 'Special Allotment Forum' were due to be discussed and the tenants had been preparing to voice their objections. But as Mahmood Mohammed, assistant area co-ordinator of Bradford West Area Panel moved onto the allotment issue the tenants were in for an unexpected surprise.

"I have been informed by Property Services that due to the time scales involved the proposal to build on the allotment site will not now go ahead."

Spontaneous applause broke out as the tenants realised what they had achieved. But as the

meeting once again settled, Mahmood revealed that whilst the battle may have been won the war was far from over,

"However Property Services have stated that if the allotments are not better used then they reserve the right to realise their assets."

So the future of the Cecil Avenue Allotment site will remain under threat for some time to come. In the words of one tenant, "Join the allotment holders and 'Dig for Victory!'"

Web sites of interest.

<http://www.allotments.net/general/links.htm> - Cambridge based site with leads of good links.

<http://www.allotments.net/allotments/Baxenden/baxenden.htm> - where allotment holders near Accrington, Lancashire are facing similar threats by housing developers.

<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmenvtra/560/56002.htm> - The final report of the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. Outlining national Government strategy for allotments.

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