



## The Better Archway Forum

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# REPORT OF THE BETTER ARCHWAY FORUM FOCUS GROUPS ON THE ARCHWAY REDEVELOPMENT

## *INTRODUCTION*

These focus groups were undertaken for the Better Archway Forum in March-April 2005 in order to supplement the information being collected by Islington Council on the views of local people about the future development of the Archway area. They were organised by a BAF member with previous experience in research and consultation methods. The Council has assured the BAF that the results of the groups will be included in their report on the consultation and in the development of their brief for the regeneration of the area.

Focus groups are a well developed and reliable method for establishing the attitudes and views of people. They do not produce statistical data – this requires a representative sample of a larger number of people. However they are an excellent way of finding out the full range of issues relating to the subject of interest, establishing what people think are the most important of these, giving explanatory reasons for their views, and asking for the solutions they see as appropriate to problems. It is not possible to collect this type of detailed information in statistical surveys.

We held eight groups in the area affected by the Archway redevelopment, with an average of 7-8 people in each group (regarded as an ideal number for focus groups). Six groups were with local residents, one with office workers from Hamlyn House, and another with Junction Road traders. There was a good geographical spread, with three residents' groups living near the proposed site and three in more outlying areas. All members of the residents' groups lived within the borough of Islington.

Rather more women than men attended the groups. The age spread was from older young people to pensioners, and we have included some views of school children from other recent consultations to help redress this imbalance. Two of the residents' groups were from council or housing association estates, and four groups lived in privately owned or rented housing. After numerous attempts, we were unable to hold a group on a second council estate because of lack of interest. Many of the participants had lived in the area for a long time. Ethnic minority people were well represented, and included black people, Greek Cypriots, Irish, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, and Mauritian. There were two registered disabled residents. Most of the office workers came from outside the immediate area but had worked in Archway for many years.

Only six of the participants were members of the Better Archway Forum – the rest being unconnected with it at the time of recruitment. A common topic guide was followed in all the groups, and they were led by a moderator who did not express his/her own opinion and encouraged everyone to take part.

In the report the term "site" means the area proposed for redevelopment, and "area" the area immediately around the site.

## ***SUMMARY AND COMMENT***

A noticeable feature of this investigation was the high degree of agreement between the different groups on a large number of issues, in spite of the varying background of participants and the nature of their stake in the area eg. social housing and private sector housing, businesses, and office workers. The differences which emerged tended to be on matters of detail rather than on the main issues. The issues where all or a clear majority of the groups agreed can be identified broadly as:

- Many of the good things about the area at present ie. its small scale character, the small shops and businesses, and the existing community facilities (pool and library)
- Many of the bad things eg. the derelict Mall, the area around the Tower, the high crime rate, and the traffic and parking problems.
- The enthusiasm for a good open space such as a piazza as a focus for the area, with seating, restaurants and community events
- The popularity of open air markets of different kinds
- The need for more green space
- The almost unanimous view that a supermarket would be bad for the area because it would destroy the existing retail outlets
- The need for a greater variety of independent small shops, providing goods not available at present, and the lack of interest in national chain stores
- The need for more upmarket restaurants as opposed to takeaways
- The need to preserve or rebuild the municipal library and swimming pool/leisure centre
- The need to make the area attractive to visitors from outside the area
- Approval of the idea of a mix of new housing on the site, including low cost and more expensive flats
- The usefulness of having some office accommodation in providing employment and bringing business to local shops
- The need for better security with a local police presence especially in the open space areas
- The concern about the impact on parking of any sizeable redevelopment, particularly in relation to new housing, a supermarket and a hotel.
- The preference for a partial redevelopment of the site, as opposed to the options of simply improving what is there or demolishing everything and starting from scratch. Partial redevelopment would mean demolishing some of the buildings and building some new ones, renovating the rest and redesigning the open spaces at ground level.

Areas where opinion was more divided were the desirability of a private health/leisure centre, an NHS clinic, a hotel, a community centre, and a cinema. On the issue of provision for the arts there was some interest from most of the groups, but this ranged from a major arts centre to some events in the piazza.

Of particular interest is that on most of the issues, residents and local businesses expressed similar views, probably because of the popularity of the small shops and the interest of the traders in many of the suggested site developments such as better entertainment facilities. It was also interesting that the traders, although worried about disruption from the scheme, were willing to support a partial redevelopment of the site, which was also the preferred option for most residents. The office workers tended to be less interested in the provision of community facilities than other groups, and had no view on some issues eg. arts provision, but this is understandable because most of them did not live locally.

The idea of a supermarket was popular with only a few of the social housing residents. Although they were small in number, their concerns should be noted, because these people said their main concern was the lower prices compared to the existing small supermarkets. If we had been able, as planned, to hold a discussion group with another social housing estate, it is possible that we may have found some others with similar concerns. However, the failure to carry out this group was due to the lack of interest on the other estate. Another issue on which the social housing residents differed from the other groups was in their concern for provision of facilities for young people.

The vision of the future of Archway which emerges from these discussions is that of a human scale development which preserves and builds on the good things which already exist in the area, and eliminates the bad aspects. An important part of this is the creation of attractive and well used public space at ground level. It is of a place which has its own special identity, catering for the needs of the local community, and also attracting people from outside to use its amenities, while at the same time incorporating elements which can make the redevelopment financially viable.

A further feature of the study was the high level of interest of most participants. This is perhaps surprising, given the many failed attempts in the past. Only one group was somewhat pessimistic about the whole idea of redeveloping the area. Most participants joined in the discussions with interest, wanted something to happen, and in many instances produced good ideas about how the redevelopment should be done.

# THE RESULTS OF THE DISCUSSIONS

## 1. WHAT PEOPLE LIKE ABOUT THE ARCHWAY AREA

In spite of all its well known problems, participants told us that there are many things they appreciate about the area. Most agreed that the swimming pool/leisure centre and the library are much valued, especially for children and young people. Several groups said they liked the small scale nature of the area and most groups liked the small shops, businesses and cafes and the variety and choice offered by them. The Archway Close and its shops were singled out by three groups as very attractive. Two groups said there was a sense of community, and another that the shops were friendly to their customers. The multicultural and socially mixed nature of the area was mentioned as an asset by one group. Many people also felt that it was essential to preserve the library, swimming pool, Post Office, bank and chemist. Convenience and ease of access were also mentioned as favorable aspects. Four groups said that the bus and tube transport links were a big asset to the area.

Also liked by some groups was the Christmas market, the use of the Mall for roller balding and biking, the varied architecture, the Archway Tavern, the proximity to nice parks eg. Waterlow Park and the historical connections (Whittington's cat).

## 2. WHAT PEOPLE DISLIKE ABOUT THE AREA

The Mall, the passage and the area by the library were seen by most as depressing, dirty, grey and derelict with a threatening atmosphere, windy and badly lit with empty shops, scaffolding and graffiti. The Tower was disliked by most of the groups, (described as "alien" and "a bleak monster") and several groups said it must go. However, most of the specific complaints about the Tower related to the area at its base, rather than the building itself. Two groups disliked Hill House and Hamlyn House ("metal and glass offices"). High street crime in the area was a problem, and there was a need for a police presence.

One group saw the area as lacking in cohesion and without a sense of identity as a place. Another group was particularly negative about the whole area around the Archway, not just the site and its immediate surroundings, describing it as "shabby and dismal".

Two groups said the existing shops were not very good and that there were too many takeaway outlets. One group wanted an improved Tube station.

The office worker group was more interested in the traffic problems in the area. They thought the one way system did not work properly, creating fumes and noise, and needed a new layout to improve the flow. Another group mentioned the difficult crossing to the Island. The area was seen as unsafe for pedestrians and cyclists. Two groups said there was a need for more parking facilities eg. away from the main roads, or perhaps underground. Another group highlighted the high cost of parking for retailers.

The residents from the Girdle stone Estate were very unhappy about the bus stand in Vorley Road. The buses create a lot of noise and pollution and drive dangerously fast, often crashing into cars. People living in the flats adjacent to the stand cannot sleep, and the buses are a danger to children. They also wanted to get rid of the MacDonal'd's which creates too much litter and sells unhealthy food.

### **3. WHAT KIND OF AN AREA SHOULD THE ARCHWAY BE?**

The groups discussed their general views on the kind of area they wanted before going on to discuss specific wants. Most groups were strongly in favour of re-routing the traffic round the back of the Island, in order to unite the two main development spaces. However one group suggested the alternative of an underpass for the traffic, and two others the idea of attractive raised walkways to unite the site, possibly from a raised piazza. Two groups thought the bus stand should be moved to provide more space for other developments. One suggestion was to put it in the space under the Tower if it was demolished. One group (the traders) wanted the pavement on the south side of Junction Road widened.

Other common views were to keep the existing small scale character of the area with its many independent shops and businesses – as one group put it “no clone town Britain here”, ie. no major stores. Some wanted more small shops both to suit the pockets of local people and also upmarket shops to attract people from outside the area. The latter would be helped by the existing good transport links.

A further common theme was that whatever was done, there was a great need for a local police presence to keep the area safe and viable. Safety would also be improved by an increase in the use of the area at night eg. by the provision of more leisure, eating out and entertainment facilities, and by community provision for young people. However the Girdlestone residents were anxious that this kind of provision on the site should be kept well away from residential properties because of the possibility of noise nuisance. Creating more of a sense of community was mentioned again. As one group put it “a safe, relaxing pedestrianised area, keeping a sense of neighbourhood”.

Several groups had a clear vision of how to create a better sense of identity. One wanted an improved pedestrian shopping area outside the Tube station, with seating and signposts to local areas of interest around the Archway. This would give a much more positive impression to visitors when they came out of the Tube. Another group proposed creating a big open space in the middle of the site with housing round it. Another group wanted to create a visual arts centre on the site, including an art cinema, an exhibition area integrated with the library, an art school for children and a studio complex. This would attract visitors (transport links an asset here). Some people however thought that better car parking and public toilets would be needed if more leisure facilities were put into the area. Two groups said that if the Tower were to be pulled down there would be a need for a new attractive and visible building or structure to replace it.

Several people mentioned that all new buildings must be energy efficient.

### **4. VIEWS ON SOME OF THE IDEAS WHICH HAVE BEEN PROPOSED FOR THE REDEVELOPMENT**

#### **Better or different kinds of shops**

Some types of shop were not provided at present and were needed. These included a butchers, fish shop, clothes shops, children’s clothes, a boutique, shoe shop, bookshop, an artisan bakery, cycle shop, crafts, junk shop, launderette, and garden centre. Some wanted the post office to have longer opening hours. One group thought that some upmarket shops would be a good thing because they would attract people to the area from outside.

Another thought that the Tube station ought to be redeveloped with a small shopping mall.

Most of the groups were not in favour of national chain stores, preferring instead that independent shops should fill the above needs. However a few people saw a need for some high street names eg. Boots, W.H. Smith to open small units.

Very few people were in favour of a large supermarket on the site. They said it would kill off the small shops, change the character of the area, and create further demand for parking space, and nuisance from extra traffic and delivery vehicles. Several thought that there were plenty already in the neighbourhood and that the existing MS and Co-op were sufficient at Archway. The MS was popular with one group because they knew their customers and did deliveries. One group thought that the Co-op would welcome the offer of a new premises in the redevelopment with a bit more space (but not a large supermarket). A supermarket would also take money out of the area. It was also associated with the idea of a "clone town".

The small minority who were in favour of a supermarket were all from the social housing areas (Peabody and Girdlestone), although even in these groups, opinion was evenly divided. Those in favour were not satisfied with the existing small supermarkets and the Sainsbury's local because the prices were too high. One disabled person felt she needed a supermarket nearby because she could not carry heavy loads of shopping. It was recognised by her group that non-car owners were more likely to need a supermarket than car owners, although some of the former said they were happy to travel to Camden Town by bus, and did not need one locally. In some cases, initial approval of a supermarket gave way to doubts when the discussion pointed out the problems which would result.

## **Views on a town square or piazza**

This was a very popular option with everyone. It was seen as helping area identity and visual impact and creating a welcome town centre, where people could chill out. A further advantage was that it would attract people from outside. Features included seating, small scale green areas and a water feature such as a fountain. One group suggested signs to areas of local historical interest and open spaces. Residents living near the site said that any night time noise would be well contained within a piazza. One suggestion was to call it Archgate.

Suggestions for the use of a piazza included markets (see below), attractive restaurants/cafes, (including a dog friendly café), open air events, fetes and street entertainment, art exhibitions, a space for graffiti, sculptures, and an open air cinema in summer.

However, many of the groups said that this idea would only work if the pedestrianised open space was properly maintained, and if there was a police presence in the neighbourhood to ensure security and discourage drug users and binge drinkers. One group did not want a fountain because it would be used as a toilet.

## **Markets**

All the groups except one were enthusiastic about open air markets. They were seen as adding diversity and interest, bringing people into the area and providing better value for some goods than a supermarket. One group was concerned that they should not compete with local shops. The traders group welcomed the idea because it would attract potential customers for their goods. Markets were seen by several groups as taking place in the piazza.

Several types of market were suggested including a farmers' market, jewellery, antiques, junk, flowers, plants, and crafts. One group commented that they would not like to see stalls selling rubbish (citing some of the Nags Head offerings). They also suggested that it would be a good idea for Archway to become known for a particular type of market as this would attract visitors.

No one was keen on a shopping mall with chainstores as this would take profits out of the area, but several groups said that a partially covered market area would be welcome.

The group which was not very keen on markets said that they did not always work, citing the one at Alexandra Palace which was not good value for money and did not offer enough choice.

### **More restaurants and cafes**

Several groups said there were enough or too many ordinary restaurants and takeaways already. However most people were keen on having some better/upmarket restaurants opening especially in the piazza, with outside sitting areas. Cafes with outside seating would also improve the library area, and would be nice in the piazza. Restaurants were popular with the traders because they would bring in more business for them. Better pubs were also mentioned, including a reasonably priced gastropub. One group thought that the pub in the Mall was suitable for late night opening if the area was improved. Two groups suggested that a restaurant at the top of a revamped tower would be popular.

### **More green space**

The area was seen as short of green space at present. Suggestions included making Archway Park better and safer, and installing some small flower beds and small trees, with attractive railings and lanterns elsewhere on the site. Several groups wanted some green or flower space in the piazza, but one thought there would not be enough room there. Hanging baskets were mentioned by two groups as an easy way to brighten up the area. One group thought that planting at the base of the tower could reduce the wind. Two groups suggested a new park either on the site of the bus stand (if it could be moved) or in the car park area at the back of Hill House. One group suggested a roof garden at the top of the tower.

### **New or improved community facilities**

The existing amenities, the pool and the library were regarded as very important to the community by nearly everyone, and these had to be retained. Most did not want a complete rebuild of the pool, and opinion was divided about whether to leave it alone or improve it eg. by introducing some lane swimming or more sports facilities. It was seen as a particular asset for children since it is the only real leisure pool for miles around. One group said it needed improved maintenance, and better supervisory staff. Another complained about the street litter created by swimmers who go to MacDonalds, and said that the pool needed its own parking space.

Many people wanted to rebuild the library on a different and more prominent site – the current area is “grotty and unsafe”. A new library could include an arts space or it could be combined with the pool. One group thought that it would be daft to knock the library down and that the area around it could be improved.

Three groups did not think there was any need for a commercial leisure/sports club because there was a municipal one already. Two groups were in favour of the idea. There was some

support for the idea of an NHS medical centre, and one group pointed out that if a lot of housing was built on the site, there would be a need for this.

Three groups wanted other facilities such as a community centre on the site and provision for young people's activities. The latter was seen as badly needed in the area, especially by the residents of social housing. Some ideas included a community hall, a youth club, a space for children to ride bikes and a sports area. One group said that people from the immediate area should have discounts for using these facilities. Other suggestions from a minority of people were a bowling alley, and a space for skateboarding. Possible locations for a community centre were the Methodist Hall or the Tower. The former would be used better if the Island were joined up to the main site.

## **Arts and exhibitions**

Four groups supported the idea of a cinema on the site – suggestions were for a small independent, an outdoor one in summer, or integrated in a new library complex. A cinema was seen by one group as catering for the needs of young people and as useful in bringing visitors to the area who would also use the restaurants. One group who lived near the site did not want a cinema because it would create nighttime noise.

Provision for the arts was favoured by most, but a stand alone gallery/exhibition space was only thought viable by one group. One group pointed out that there was already good arts provision in nearby Waterlow Park. However another group thought an arts/library/studio complex could be a major feature of the redevelopment (see Section 3 above). Other suggestions were for exhibition space in a new library, in a hotel (if built), on the top floor of the Tower, in the Methodist Hall or in the piazza.

## **New housing**

A mix of new housing on the site was thought desirable by most people and this must include some provision for low income groups, families, the disabled and key workers (eg. from the hospital). Many people recognised that housing was needed on the site to help make it commercially viable. Several groups thought that luxury flats would be a good idea as part of the mix, perhaps located in the Tower or the office blocks. The area was seen by many as suitable for luxury housing because of the good location of the Archway and its excellent public transport. There was also a recent growth in the number of young professionals wanting to live in the area. One group favoured the idea in principle but thought that it would not succeed because of the unattractive environment in the whole neighbourhood around the site. There were also some doubts about building large numbers of high rise flats.

Housing was seen as good for the area because it increases the demand for shops, keeps people in the area at all hours, and stops it "getting seedy".

Problems of new housing centred mainly around the demand for parking, which was already a serious problem for residents. Some people expressed the view that if people pay £400,000 for a flat they are going to want parking space. Other problems mentioned were noise for existing residents and the need for additional infrastructure such as doctors, schools and transport.

## **Office accommodation**

The majority liked the idea of some office accommodation on the site. The advantages were that the office workers spend money locally, give employment to local people, and do not require much parking space. Self employment units were also thought a good idea, and one

group wanted business clusters and eco-organisations. Office provision was seen as necessary for the commercial viability of the site as a whole. The Archway was a good location because of the public transport links. Also for good quality offices to work, high quality local restaurants and shops are needed. The office worker group thought that the existing number should be kept with rebuilding, recladding or improvement, and saw advantages for local businesses and shops.

However, several groups said that there was an oversupply of offices in London at present and that they would not be able to charge high rents, so might not be commercially viable. A disadvantage mentioned by one group was that offices leave the area dead at night.

## A Hotel

There was some support for this idea, but opinion was divided about the type of hotel - views ranged from cheap hostel accommodation to luxury provision. Some groups saw a need for a cheap hotel in the area and thought that only a cut price chain would work. One group was afraid that it might turn into a brothel or B&B accommodation for refugees. Others thought that because of the good location (near Highgate) a luxury hotel would work. It might be located in the Tower (the view is marvellous) or in one of the office blocks. A hotel with a conference centre was also suggested.

The demand for parking from a hotel was a major concern for several groups.

## 5. VIEWS ON POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO SITE DEVELOPMENT

The groups discussed three possible approaches to redevelopment:

- (a) Keeping the existing buildings and renovating them and the surrounding spaces
- (b) Demolishing some of the buildings and building new ones, renovating others and redesigning the open space at ground level
- (c) Demolishing everything except a few listed or architecturally interesting buildings and building new ones with a redesign of open space at ground level.

They were also asked for their reactions to very tall buildings on the site.

**Option (a)** was favoured by some people in one of the groups. They said they would like to get rid of the Tower, but were afraid that if it went, the whole site would have to come down. They wanted to avoid a lot of tall buildings as this would change the nature of the area drastically. They thought that it would be feasible to renovate the buildings including the Tower, improve the ground level space under the Tower and in front of the library, and deal with the wind problem. However some of this group thought that removing Hill House would be a good idea because a big open square could then be created with offices at the back and houses on Vorley Road. This would depend on the removal of the bus station.

Another group considered option (a) but were doubtful if existing owners could be made to improve the buildings. A further group considered the idea but thought it would be difficult to achieve a really good result.

**Option (b)** was the most popular, with five groups in favour. A variety of solutions was proposed. One group wanted to leave the Tower and turn it into a hotel and luxury flats, with restaurants open to the public, and demolish Hill House. The Methodist Hall could be turned into a community centre. Another group thought that a way forward might be an incremental approach from a modest start, perhaps involving a development trust. Any development

would have to be sensitive to local needs. It would be essential to sort out the wind problems. It might be a good idea to keep the Tower with re-cladding and public access to the top, and pull down the Mall buildings. However they wondered whether a developer could be found to take up the idea of a partial scheme. A third group was rather sceptical of any type of redevelopment being a success, but tended to favour option (b). They had very poor opinion of the quality of the whole neighbourhood around the site, and said this would be an obstacle to making a profit from a complete rebuild. Some in this group felt that the main focus for change should be to sort out the traffic problems at the gyratory eg. with a flyover or underpass. They also wanted to move the bus station but did not know where it could go.

A fourth group (the traders) said that a lot of the benefits identified could be achieved by refurbishing existing buildings and spaces, but that the improved entertainment facilities could only be provided if there was some rebuild. They wanted to keep the Tower, but said it needed to be fully let. The main problem with it was the space at the bottom, not the building itself. The idea of a full scale rebuild was rejected because the disruption caused would not be compensated for by any long term benefits. They were anxious that any redevelopment should be done with the minimum disruption. The last group in favour of option (b) wanted the Tower to come down and the removal of the bus stand. Any rebuild should be low density around a piazza.

**Option (c)** was favoured by only one group. A full scale redevelopment was thought to be economically viable without a supermarket and hotel, by building some very expensive flats and a private health club. The development of a culture and arts centre at the heart of the site could bring in government funding and lottery money, and make the area attractive to visitors (see Section 3).

Another group (the office workers) did not express a view on the rebuilding options, but their responses to other questions seem to indicate that they would have been happy with a partial redevelopment or an improvement to the status quo.

## Tall buildings

Five groups offered their views. Four did not want them included in the rebuild. They were held unsuitable for Archway, creating a sense of insecurity, blocking the light, and obstructing views of London eg. from the Archway Bridge. The one group in favour said there needed to be a variety of heights to prevent an “oppressive feeling”. Some advantages were seen eg. if they were interesting structures such as the Gherkin, and as creating a navigational reference point. Interestingly, many of the people who were against high buildings were willing to keep the Tower for other reasons, vs. option (b).

**Other issues** raised in connection with the development were the problems which would be created by any lengthy closure of the Tube station (of particular concern to the traders), the parking problems resulting from the changes of use to the site, the need to reduce the amount of concrete used in the buildings, and compensation for local businesses and residents for the disruption caused by any redevelopment. Also the council should be in the driving seat, not a developer.

## The views of young people

Young people were very under-represented in the focus groups. We therefore made use of data on the views of schoolchildren and their parents from some consultation exercises about the Archway area carried out by Agenda 21 and Hargrave Park School in 2002. The main concerns were:

- Cleaning up the area – seen as very dirty and “disgusting”

- Making it tidier and removing the scaffolding at the Tower base
- Making it much safer -too much crime around
- Getting rid of the druggies
- Have more police and security cameras
- Reducing pollution
- Fewer cars
- More park space and a space for animals
- Shops where favourite food is on sale
- More leisure activities for young people
- Better cleaning of the swimming pool

The things they liked about the existing area were the swimming pool, the playgrounds, and the shops.