

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

Issue No 11 October 1998

CUTS OR TAXES? IS THERE A CHOICE?

Islington's New Labour rulers have a dilemma. Either raise Council Tax massively or cut £60 million from the Council budget over the next four years. They seem to have decided against any tax increase. Apparently they do not see any merit in begging for extra government funds or trying to put off the evil day by rescheduling the massive debts that are at the root of the money problems.

Many people will welcome the new air of fiscal realism that seems to be taking root in the Town Hall. Many more will agree that the Council Tax is high enough already. But cuts of £60 million are going to cause real pain and deprivation on a scale not seen so far. Only the most essential services and those which must be provided by law are likely to survive.

So what is an essential service and what are we prepared to do without? Do we really need Youth and Community Workers, or libraries or Meals on Wheels or swimming pools, or park-keepers? Would it be better to cut out some services altogether to preserve others intact; or should we cut across the board and risk having services so under-funded as to be useless?

When we ask ourselves these questions seriously, do we really accept that our Council Tax is too high in absolute terms, or is it only too high in relation to what we get by way of Council Services?

Suppose the Council were to make a contract with the electors to take a grip on the finances, cut waste ruthlessly and overhaul its administrative procedures, might we, the electors, not respond by accepting that the excesses and follies of the past 27 years cannot be put right in the next 4 - and that the price we have to pay in the medium term is higher taxes to protect the most vulnerable from the worst of the proposed cuts?

On page 3 of this issue we bring you an article from Mildmay Ward Councillor, Pat Haynes, explaining the background and implications of the proposals; and in the next column Sue Higgs describes how the cuts would affect one important local community project that is probably typical of many other services throughout the borough.

BLACKSTOCK ADVICE UNDER THREAT!

By Sue Higgs

This time next year we could be ancient history, if Islington Council implements proposed cuts to Blackstock Advice & Community Project (BACP) and a large number of voluntary groups around the Borough. Where will people go for advice and other essential services?

The Blackstock project has been around since 1982 when a group of local people concerned at the lack of advice provision in the area were successful in their bid for funding from LBI.

Currently, we offer two *Drop In* advice sessions on Mondays and Thursdays from 10 -12 (it is usual for these sessions to continue until 2pm). We give Advice by appointment on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays; we operate a Telephone Advice Line on Wednesdays and Fridays between 11 & 12 and we make home visits in the Highbury Vale Neighbourhood to the Housebound/people with disabilities by appointment.

We are often a last resort for people who have been confused and frustrated in trying to sort out their problems by themselves or having to deal with Council departments or the DSS. Problems are compounded for our many clients who do not speak English as their first language or at all.

Side by side with the Advice service we offer Community work support and development. Our programme of community activities include a Pensioners' Lunch Club twice a week at Stephen's Ink

Community Hall, the coordination of the Gillespie Action Group for the Elderly which organises outings, entertainments and provides cold weather equipment to older people at risk during the winter months, coordination and organisation of the very successful Gillespie Park Festival and work with the Blackstock Estate Tenant's Association and the Aubert Court Community Association.

The Community Worker also works with other groups on projects which focus on issues of concern or interest to people both locally and borough wide. These include the Finsbury Park Street Drinkers Initiative, the Finsbury Park Community Regeneration Initiative, Friends of Gillespie Park and the Asylum Seekers in Islington Relief Trust. Locally, we attend Forum meetings and are active in Forum sub-groups such as the Service Improvement Panel, the Cleansing Enforcement sub-committee and the Youth and Play sub committee .

We at the Blackstock project aim to offer a service which is responsive to the changing needs of our community.

We believe that this is what we do. If you would like to support us please come in and sign our petition, lobby your local Councillors and write letters to your MP. ☐

BACP : 213A Blackstock Road (next to the Police Station) NS 2LL Tel: 0171 226 6222.

FINSBURY PARK AREA - REFLECTION ON 50 YEARS OF CHANGE

by Margot Sreberny

It must be a sign of age - memories of the past come to my mind and I thought I would share some of them with you. Comparing them to the present may be an interesting exercise too.

I came to live in Finsbury Park Road in 1948 soon after I got married to a G.P. His was the only car on my block and children played peacefully and safely on pavements.

Blackstock Road was proud of its two fresh fish shops and three butchers who did their own carving. There was not a cafe nor restaurant on the horizon, the only place to have a cup of tea or buy a Lyons cake was the Lyons Tea Shop on the main Seven Sisters Road. Just round the

corner was the Finsbury Park Empire, where Vaudeville Court exists now. It was a jolly and cosy venue for pantomimes and variety shows. We also had two local cinemas, the Astoria (the Rainbow) and the Rink, where the Ten Pin Bowling is now. We'll never know why they all closed.

Finsbury Park Station had a wooden fence entrance to it for over 35 years (bomb damage) and was unpleasant to use even then. It was only rebuilt in 1985 and must be the only London station without a toilet! It is ripe for improvements - for safety's sake and for aesthetic values. Seven Sisters Road was a two-way road all the way, and Isledon Road was a quiet

backwater. Traffic as so much less and none of the one-way systems existed. As car ownership was minimal, Arsenal games rarely presented traffic problems in those days.

Finsbury Park itself was a wonderful park in those days, used well by children and adults alike. It was well run and full of park-keepers and tree surgeons who manicured the lawns and tended the flowerbeds and lopped the trees. The bandstand near the lake held concerts in the summer and children's entertainment in holiday time.

But enough - the exercise for you now is to compare and contrast the past with the present!

Do we need regenerating?

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF.....

Councillor Pat Haynes, Islington's longest serving councillor, (and one of the busiest) tells us how he spends his day.....

"An interesting and somewhat full day.

Islington Voluntary Action Council having notice of widespread and deep cuts in grants to Council-funded bodies called a meeting at the Central Library to discuss the actions they ought to take. About 60 organisations were represented.

I spoke and encouraged the fullest possible activity, including contacts with local councillors. Frank Cartwright was scathing and said "Had any hint of this been made before the Borough Election they would not have been elected". Harbinder Kaur (Age Concern), Sally Billot (CAB), Jenny Broadbent (IVYS) addressed us. Joe Harris outlined possible courses of action.

I then attended lunch and a meeting of the Cripplegate Foundation Governors; their area of benefit has been extended to cover not just Bunhill but also now 6 other wards and as they dispense about

£ 1 million this is good news for Islington.

From there I went to a gathering of NQMs, NDOs and Whittington Neighbourhood Reps at the invitation of Gearoid O'Meachair. This was really a social occasion overshadowed by the proposals to do away with the NQMs in the near future; a fight back is assured.

From there I cycled down to the Town Hall where the Mayor, Councillor Meg Hillier, launched the National Year of Reading. Leisha Fullick (C.E.), Andy Roberts (Dir. of Ed.) and Liz Roberts (Bor. Lib) and Roy Blatchford addressed us. A good party ensued.

From here I cycled up to the Red Rose for the Labour Party North Islington G.C. where we approved a resolution for a conference critical of the Government's recent hasty anti-terrorism legislation.

I had cycled from home in Mildmay Road to the Town Hall, dealt with post, then to the Central Library in Fieldway Crescent. Then down to Central Street, Finsbury, then Junction Road by Tufnell Park Station then down to the Town Hall, then to the Red Rose, Seven Sisters Road and then back home to Mildmay Road; all thanks to my bicycle!

What was achieved? I had a glass in my hand most of the time and enjoyed convivial conversations along the way. I told IVAC members to fight and help change Councillors' attitudes before it is too late. I discussed C.A.B. in Islington as my Committee and Cripplegate fund them very considerably and their management is in disarray, this was useful; I saw several NQMs; and the launch of the National Year of Reading, which I saw as part of the campaign to stop the closure of any library in Islington."

Pat Haynes, Labour Councillor for Mildmay Ward 16.09.98

The Grey Squirrel - Friend or Foe? A Highbury resident writes in defence

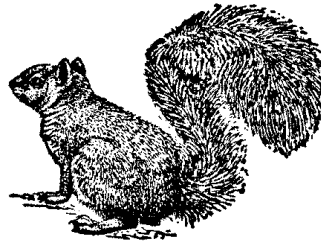
Most residents of the Highbury area are probably aware of the presence of grey squirrels, either in gardens or in Highbury Fields, and I am sometimes surprised and dismayed by the negative attitude of some people towards them - "tree-rats", "vermin".

However, after a long period of observing, feeding and reading about them, I am putting forward a few facts and comments in the hope of converting presumably ill-informed opponents - (usually keen gardeners!)

The first recorded introduction of the N. American greys was in 1876, at Highbury Park in Cheshire, when two squirrels were released. But there had been sightings of them as early as 1828 in Denbyshire and Montgomeryshire (possibly brought in by travellers or seamen?) Then in 1900 ten more were introduced to Woburn Abbey, and further introductions followed - usually by aristocrats and landed gentry to enhance

their estates, and the creatures thrived and spread throughout Britain.

One of the greatest myths, still exploited by interested pressure-groups (such as the forestry industry and re-



peated by ill-informed media), is the old "Reds versus Greys" argument, which is not based upon scientific studies and facts. The greys are NOT responsible for the decline of the reds. There are many factors which have caused this decline :

- ◆ The reds have always been prone to epidemic diseases, wiping out whole colonies.

- ◆ Their food-range is more restricted than that of the greys, and much of its normal habitat was destroyed for commercial reasons many years ago, particularly in England and Wales.

Reds now only cling on to small pockets in Scotland, Northern England, Wales, East Anglia and the Isle of Wight with quite a large population in Ireland.

The greys, on the other hand, are more robust, less timid, more adaptable and have a much wider range of food. Greys are no more 'destructive' than the reds who are not technically our native squirrels [*Sciurus vulgaris leocourus*], as is so often quoted to fire the debate, but were also imported from Europe albeit long before the greys were introduced. □

Next Issue - Habits, breeding, territorial behaviour and diet.

YOUR SQUIRREL CORRESPONDENT.

CUTS CUTS CUTS!!! by Cllr Pat Haynes

Recent weeks have seen frantic preparations for the Council's Labour Group away weekend, October 3 and 4, and discussions on the budget for the next four years with emphasis on 1999/2000 and on the recent Government White paper on Local Government. The result of the Borough election in May being 26:26 was a severe shock to the Labour Party and it seems almost universally acknowledged that the level of Council Tax, the highest in London, was poor value and that we were not good landlords for our 35,000 tenants - many of whom abstained or voted Liberal Democrat.

The reaction of the Labour leadership has been to decide that the Council Tax must not rise in the next four years and preferably be reduced. Also, that balances must be created, room made for growth, some old debts paid off and this with the reduction of the Government's Rate Support Grant and the prospect of a reduced Standard Spending Assessment, ie a Government estimate of what we ought to spend - so worse to come adds up to a dread outlook.

Cuts of £60 million from our budget of £236 million with over £20 million in the first year are the recommendations coming forth.

The implications of all this are grim - closing all our old people's homes, five of our ten libraries, halving our youth provision, closing or cutting by up to 100% many community

centres and voluntary organisations, etc, etc, with between 1,000 and 1,500 Council employees losing their jobs.

I think much of this can be avoided. The Government guideline for inflation for local authorities is 6%. We do not have to have balances (we have managed without for a number of years), and although we have priorities for example, fighting crime, there is, as yet, not much Government finance coming our way. We can again re-schedule some debts and generally make efforts to persuade the Government to increase the annual London's rate support and, what would be a godsend, restoration of the commercial rates taken away by the Tory Government. We do not yet know next year's rate support grant.

However, my colleagues are compiling the details of the huge cuts they are recommending and everybody is being consulted on them.

There are also proposals to reform the decision-making process - both officer and Member level, along the lines of the Government White Paper, doing away with committees, with perhaps an elected Mayor, or a small cabinet of Members mirroring the Chief Executive's executive board of four. Much of this is in Leisha Fullick's (the Chief Executive) paper entitled "**Modernising Islington**". I regret to say it seems to me a more accurate title would be "**Destroying Islington**". It is now for the people of Islington to give their views and, I hope, make my colleagues draw back from agreeing the Draconian measures now published. □

COUNCIL REPORTED TO OMBUDSMAN

Last month Chris Ashby reported in HCA News that an application to build houses on a designated Nature Conservation area, the Isledon Village Railway Sidings, had been passed despite major protest from residents. Not only is this against the Council's own guide-lines but there is no infra-structure to support yet more people living in yet another housing development in this crowded area of Islington North.

Since then, Nick Jack has reported the Council to the Government Ombudsman. The Ombudsman has asked that complaint via the Council's own complaints system be actioned first. Residents are now at the second stage of this in-house complaints system and will return to the Ombudsman unless satisfied. The protestors are working on several fronts and FPAG (Finsbury Park Action Group) is investigating the possibility of taking the Council to Judicial Review.

Many residents of Isledon Village, plus others, wrote to the Government Office for London asking for the decision to be 'called-in' to Public Inquiry. Nick Jack wants to thank these people and says "The strength of local protest is obviously very strong. The reason we cannot get a Public Inquiry is because the site is physically too small to justify one. We are trying these other routes of complaint in order to bring Islington Council's outrageous conduct to account".

PUBLIC MEETING ON ROBIN'S GARDEN DEVELOPMENT

Highbury Fields Association has organised a Public Meeting on Wednesday 14th October on the implications of the building of 3 blocks of flats and 10 3-bed houses with garages on this large area of rough ground facing the Fields and bounded by Arvon, Melgund and Ronalds Roads.


The area has been empty and overgrown since the Second

World War and is currently a haven for wildlife and a home to a family of foxes. There is concern over the intensity of the development and the provision of car-parking spaces.

The meeting is on **Wednesday 14th October at 7pm, Highbury Roundhouse, 71 Ronalds Road.** What will be the impact of such a development on the area : traffic, parking, noise etc?

To comment on the application (no. 97/2367) write to Chief Planner (Control), LBI, 222 Upper Street, N1 1YA

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172A BLACKSTOCK ROAD HIGHBURY N5
(Two doors from Arsenal Motors)

Tel: 0171 704 8207

HCA NEWS DELIVERY

Thanks to Anna Banks for responding to last month's appeal for a Distribution Co-ordinator. Also to Bay Hodgson for his offer of 'folding' help and to all the volunteers who spend time delivering this Community Newsletter!

Anna needs someone to take over for November's issue - any offers?

Ring: 359 5731

HOUSE PAINTER AND DECORATOR

Tim is available for large or small jobs from early November 1998. References provided. Tel: 0181 548 4370

PET SITTING SERVICE

Pat Tuson will look after your pet when you go away. Tel: 0171 609 5093

HCA XMAS PARTY !!!!

No-one has volunteered yet to organise this! If you would like to set this up with a few neighbours or friends please ring:

Tony Wood on 354 0574

Highbury Community Association
The HCA represents residents and businesses, on all aspects of living and working in Highbury, Stoke Newington and Finsbury Park.