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Residents and emergency services at the scene of last month's attacks
Credit: Anna Mahtani

Councillor slams government after antisemitic ambulance attack

BY ANNA MAHTANI & DAVID FLOYD

A Barnet councillor has called on the government to do more to protect the Jewish community following an arson attack in Golders Green last month. Four Hatzola ambulances were set on fire outside a synagogue in Golders Green in the early hours of Monday, 23rd March. The incident is being treated as an antisemitic hate crime and two men have since been arrested in connection with it. Shimon Ryde, a ward councillor for Hendon who lives nearby, was on the scene soon afterwards and called for the government to “really take seriously” the threat felt by the Jewish community. It was shortly after 1.30 am on

23rd March when London Fire Brigade (LFB) received the first of 56 calls about explosions near the Machzike Hadath Synagogue in Highfield Road. No-one was injured in the attack, although nearby homes were evacuated and the explosions caused broken windows in the neighbouring block of flats. The ambulances belonged to Hatzola Northwest, a Jewish volunteer service that provides emergency medical services to the whole community. The multiple explosions are believed to be linked with gas canisters onboard the ambulances. Police arrived on the scene, alongside the fire brigade and TfL Incident Response Unit, and cordoned off the area. Nearby houses were

evacuated and the road was closed. Jonathan Royan, a 28-year-old chef who lives in the evacuated building, was asleep when the first explosion went off. He awoke at the sound. He told *Barnet Post*: “I looked out of my window and there was blazing fire from two ambulances, my windows and my doors started vibrating a lot.” That’s when someone knocked on his door to tell him to evacuate. Jonathan woke up his flatmate and went down to the street. “We grabbed what we could and we left the building.” He added: “We had to help an elderly man who was in a wheelchair, so we had to lift him from the fourth floor to the ground floor to leave the building.”

Cllr Ryde, who arrived shortly after the first explosions, told the *Post* that while a lot of residents had local families to stay with, some were left stranded. “We assisted them to one of the communal buildings so that they had somewhere warm,” he explained, as well as providing the evacuees with drinks, coffee and biscuits. About 20 people were being housed in the nearby youth centre PAI House until the flats were deemed safe to re-enter. A few elderly people were taken away in an ambulance due to mobility issues. “As a community we’ve been on high alert. We’ve been just waiting

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ABOUT

Barnet Post is the borough's free community newspaper: written by and for local people, giving you the chance to learn more about what is going on in your area and to read (and write) stories about what matters to you.

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Hendon Town Hall with (inset left) council leader Barry Rawlings and (inset right) opposition group leader Peter Zinkin

Labour's new Barnet Council budget approved amid row over tax levels

BY JOE IVES, LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER

Councillors have passed Barnet Council's new budget despite opposition concerns the local authority is "committing financial suicide" in a bid to bolster its election chances.

The budget for the 2026/27 financial year, which begins in April, was passed at a full council meeting last month, with both Labour and Conservatives taking the chance to fire the starting pistol for their upcoming electoral campaigns.

It finds the local authority using emergency measures to manage budget shortfalls for the second year in a row.

Speaking ahead of the vote on Thursday, 5th March, Labour council leader Barry Rawlings said the budget was aimed at "delivering quality services while keeping council tax low".

The council would continue its "relentless hunt for savings," he argued, adding his administration was committed to looking after the local authority's long-term financial health.

Conservative opposition leader Peter Zinkin criticised the plans, describing the council's budget strategy "as nothing short of financial suicide on a breathtaking scale".

Cllr Zinkin deployed charts and even a slideshow to argue the local authority could have

an annual deficit of over £200m in the next five years.

One of the main concerns is the council's use of exceptional financial support (EFS) from the government for the second successive year.

The council needed £55.7m of EFS to balance the books for 2025/26 and requested a further £79.3m to do so in 2026/27.

EFS allows councils to treat some day-to-day spending as longer-term capital spending, which is usually funded through borrowing. A total of 37 authorities across England have been granted exceptional financial support for the 2026/27 year – seven more than in the previous year.

Earlier this month, neighbouring Haringey Council agreed to similar measures, and has been allowed to use even more EFS than Barnet, with £54m in 2025/26 and £84m for the upcoming year.

In Barnet, Cllr Rawlings said he was proud that his administration had never raised council tax by the maximum amount. The charge will still be going up by 4.98% this year, however – just 0.01% shy of the limit.

The decision means the average Band D resident will be paying 15p less than they could have been over the next twelve months – the practical equivalent of a 20% saving on a single pint of milk. As a result, the overall Band D council tax bill will go up nearly £77.

This move attracted the ire of the Conservative opposition. In February, they said the local authority would need to raise council tax by 30% over the next three years to address its financial woes.

However, it's not clear how such a move could be implemented, as the maximum amount a council can increase its council tax in one year without holding a referendum is 4.99%.

Responding to Tory criticisms of not raising council tax to the maximum amount, Cllr Rawlings said: "Council tax increases are our last resort. For the Conservatives it's their first choice."

He accused Cllr Zinkin of "channeling his inner Dad's Army" in the alternative budget put forward by Conservatives. It was, he said, the plan for "a council of despair".

Cllr Zinkin responded, accusing the council of trying to hide a "black hole" of debt ahead of the May elections and said the budget was tantamount to a "betrayal" of Barnet residents.

Alison Moore, the Labour administration's cabinet member for adult social care and health, responded by saying the council had already made savings and had improved the finances of the local authority since taking power in 2022.

She described the new budget as "a roadmap to financial sustainability" which was investing money now to save in future.

Measles cases recorded in at least nine London boroughs

BY JOE IVES, LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER

Measles cases have spread to at least nine London boroughs – but information on where more than 40% of these cases are happening has not been released.

Enfield continued to be the worst impacted borough in the capital last month, with Haringey also hard hit, but it remained unclear which other boroughs are affected as the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) only publishes specific data on boroughs with ten or more infections.

UKHSA confirmed that, as of 9th March, Enfield had recorded nine additional infections, taking its total to 80 cases since the start of the year.

The data also show an additional two recorded infections in neighbouring Haringey. This takes the total of measles cases reported in the borough since the start of the year to 15.

Enfield and Haringey together represent 95 of the total 146 cases recorded in the capital. This, given UKHSA's own reporting practice, means the other 40% of documented infections in the capital have occurred across at least seven additional boroughs.

The UKHSA admits that reported figures "are likely to underestimate" the actual number of infections, especially over the past month. This is due to lags in cases being reported.

North Central London Integrated Care Board (NCL ICB) is responsible for co-ordinating NHS services across Barnet, Enfield, Haringey, Camden and Islington.

Dr Jo Sauvage, the ICB's chief medical officer, says the measles outbreak is mainly affecting children in schools and nurseries, with the most severe cases – requiring hospital treatment – linked to unvaccinated patients.

The North London NHS boss reaffirmed the importance of vaccination, saying: "Measles resurges when vaccination rates fall, but this is something we can turn around."

"The vaccine is safe and effective, and by boosting uptake quickly we can prevent further outbreaks."

Credit N Voitkevich via Pexels



NEWS



Polanski promises focus on “people not profit” during North Finchley visit

Anna Mahtani meets the Green Party leader as he meets local activists

Green Party leader Zack Polanski with Barnet Green candidates and activists at Artsdepot. Credit: Anna Mahtani

Green Party leader Zack Polanski expressed confidence about his party’s local election chances in Barnet during a visit to the borough last month.

Polanski, who has overseen a surge in the polls and big increase in party membership since becoming leader last year, was speaking at a meeting of party members and candidates at Artsdepot in North Finchley on Saturday, 7th March.

The event was part of the Greens’ ‘Big Day Out’, which aimed to rally party members while also carrying out door-to-door campaigning and flyering.

Charli Thompson, one of the party’s local candidates for May’s local election, began the event with a positive message, drawing on Green candidate Hannah Spencer’s February by-election victory in the Manchester seat of Gorton and Denton and the subsequent news that Green Party membership had risen to over 200,000.

She said: “To me, that brings real tangible hope that with community we can create positive change together.”

Polanski responded enthusiastically to news of recent Labour polling data which warned of a Green victory across London councils – bringing Labour down to fourth place in the capital (while also predicting a Conservative win in Barnet).

He told *Barnet Post*: “We have candidates who are ready to campaign, and most importantly stand up for local residents.” He also pledged to “fight for

local services” and “challenge power and wealth.”

He added: “We’ve got policies for the local area that people want: to fund our public services, to stand up against cuts, and to speak out against this failing national Labour government.”

The *Post* asked the Green leader how he thought the party would fare in Barnet. He said: “I’m really confident about our chances in Barnet, but not complacent. We’re going to be out there, making the case and campaigning for every single vote.”

He added: “I’m confident that that’s a message that will resonate right across Barnet.”

Polanski added that he believes the Greens will bring fresh and energising ideas to the borough in order to “represent the people not profit”. That’s why he was so enthusiastic about the current candidates, especially George Ttoouli and Charli Thompson who are hoping to be elected to Woodhouse ward.

He said: “They’re people who have got into politics not because they want to be something, but because they want to do something.”

During his speech at the event, Polanski strongly denounced the US and Israeli missile strike which

killed at least 165 schoolgirls in Iran, mainly between the ages of seven and twelve. For council ward level to international politics, he argued that the Greens’ commitment to being member-funded means they refuse to be complicit in “corruption” or “war crimes”.

“To anyone who wants to get more involved, this is the perfect time,” he added. “We’re training people up and going door-to-door and having actual conversations with people, not lecturing or hectoring them but listening to what people want to change in the area.”

Talking to the *Post*, Polanski also revealed that this was not his first time visiting Artsdepot.

He had performed there previously while working in the arts and described it as his favourite spot in the borough – both for its artistic programmes and its commitment to community.

He said: “I have such fond memories of this arts centre, so it was lovely to hold a rally there this morning.”

Even before Polanski’s visit, momentum had been building for the Greens in Barnet, with former Labour and then independent member Linda Lusingu becoming the party’s first councillor in February.

And local support is apparently surging. Woodhouse candidate, George Ttoouli, grew up in Barnet and spent

most of his working life in Coventry. Soon after returning to London in 2022, he got involved with the local Greens. With Reform UK membership rising, he was drawn to what he saw as the Greens’ message of hope.

He explained that the party’s big increase in membership nationally has been replicated in Barnet: “This time last year we had 220 members,” he said. “Now, we have over a thousand.”

He added: “We are in a position we couldn’t have dreamed of a year ago, and we really are trying to make this work, not just for winning seats, but for improving communities.”

As part of the Big Day Out over 150 of those members had turned up to volunteer by knocking on doors and handing out flyers, from longtime Green Party supporters to new joiners.

Among them was Matt Wheeler, a 54-year-old educator who said he found the day “really enjoyable” and hoped to help get the Green candidates elected. Meanwhile, first time volunteer Rahim Mahmood, a 25-year-old software engineer, said: “It’s nice to be part of something and seeing how the Greens are growing really quickly and how everything is scaling from the ground floor.”

It’s too soon to say how big a presence (if any) the Greens will have at the town hall after May’s election, but they definitely can’t be ignored.

“
We’re going door-to-door and having actual conversations with people
”

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NEWS

Land sell-off agreed by council to ‘ensure’ new homes are delivered as partnership is ditched



These valuations will be commissioned by Barnet Council.

Places for Barnet was established by the local authority in August 2024 following a vote the previous year. Its aim was to work with private developers to deliver new homes, including affordable homes, as well as community facilities on council-owned land.

LPG is a private limited company based in Covent Garden. On its website, the company says its “architecture-led developments create projects that would otherwise not be capable of funding genuinely affordable housing and services”.

Speaking ahead of the decision, council leader Barry Rawlings said: “The reason for it is the change of circumstances and this seems the best way forward to ensure that work happens, that social housing is built – and we don’t just have a lot of empty sites with nothing happening. “This is about a way forward.”

Cllr Rawlings also pointed out that any development on the land would still have to gain approval from the local authority’s planning committee.

The council’s partnership with LPG

has been one of several controversies surrounding developments proposed by Places for Barnet.

The council-owned LLC, in partnership between with LPG, previously unveiled plans to build ten homes on another site in Manor Park Road, despite the fact that it had been removed from the council’s Local Plan when a planning inspector said its inclusion was “not justified and should be deleted”.

The plans were dropped last year following opposition from local residents and The Finchley Society as well as criticism from opposition Conservative councillors.

The council agreed to re-run its due diligence on LPG, formerly known as Kuropatwa Group, following its name change.

In response to questions on why the company had been chosen as a partner in preference to other bidders following meetings in 2022, the local authority admitted it had failed to keep hold of the relevant information.

It added: “We recognise that we have not met the standards we would expect in terms of digital record keeping and have taken steps to ensure that this does not happen in the future.”

BY JOE IVES,
LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER

Barnet Council has agreed to sell-off land so that a private developer can build homes, citing budgetary constraints.

At a cabinet meeting in February councillors agreed to sell land at Park House in High Road and Avion Crescent, Colindale, to a private development partner.

It will enable the council to save money while still delivering housing.

The land will be sold as a freehold to private developers London Placemaking Group Limited (LPG).

In the case of Avion Crescent, LPG is expected to grant a 125-year lease back to Barnet Council so it can retain a previously-awarded Greater London Authority (GLA) grant to help deliver on plans for 125 affordable homes at the site.

The decision means that future costs – and potential profits – that arise from the developments will no longer impact the local authority’s finances.

The decision also means ‘Places for Barnet’, the council’s limited liability partnership (LLP), will be dissolved so the private developers can take over the projects.

Speaking ahead of the decision, a council officer said the need to provide affordable accommodation in Barnet combined with the financial difficulties faced by the local authority means “doing nothing with council land that can be developed is not an option”.

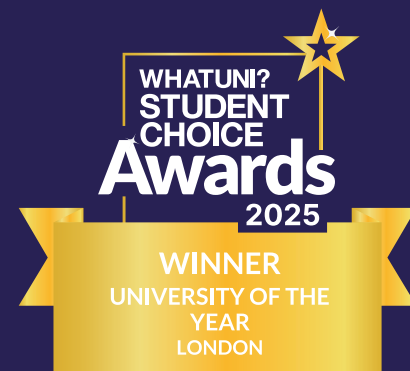
The decision, he said, “minimises [the cost] to the council and maximises the benefit to the community”.

The sale is dependent on the condition that LPG honours a commitment to deliver affordable homes at the sites. The firm must also deliver a replacement facility for Trinity Church at Avion Crescent and support a replacement for the nursery at Park House, which will have to close.

The selling price of the council-owned land will be determined by two independent ‘red book’ valuations for each site.

“This seems the best way forward to ensure that social housing is built – and we don’t have empty sites with nothing happening”

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Science and technology at Middlesex University follows a proud tradition of bringing learning to life, tackling real-world challenges, and collaborating across different fields – for students, for partners, and for the wider community.

Every year, Middlesex shows that commitment by welcoming hundreds of local students onto campus for its STEM Festival to experience and explore the wonders of science, during British Science Week.

Activities for the students range from discovering tiny “water bears” under a microscope to using their brain activity through a special headset to set a digital barrel afloat. This year, astronomer and science communicator Dr Sheila Kanani gave a talk about her career path and set out the wide range of job opportunities across the space industry.

This kind of exploration runs through Middlesex’s STEM research culture too. One example is the work of Dr Enas Newire and her colleagues, who study how to control antimicrobial resistance, when bacteria become resistant to antibiotics using techniques such as gene editing. Dr Newire has started a research group with specialists in diverse fields to raise Middlesex’s profile in this topical and high priority area.

Dr Newire says Middlesex “offers all the facilities and support to unlock potential. It was a home for my ideas.” Students help raise wider awareness at public events where they swab everyday items, grow samples in the lab, and share the results a week later. The aim is to help people understand how to use antibiotics responsibly and reduce the risk of resistance.

The London Sport Institute, based at Saracens’ StoneX Stadium houses state-of-the-art facilities including an extensive biomechanics room, human performance and cognition labs, and a bespoke Sports Performance Analysis suite. Many of the staff are working professionals with three also working at Arsenal, one at Tottenham Hotspur, and two at British Weightlifting. The Institute has research partnerships with golf’s Ladies’ European Tour, Ipswich Town FC, and American football team the Cleveland Browns, and has students on professional placements at organisations such as UEFA and the Lawn Tennis Association.

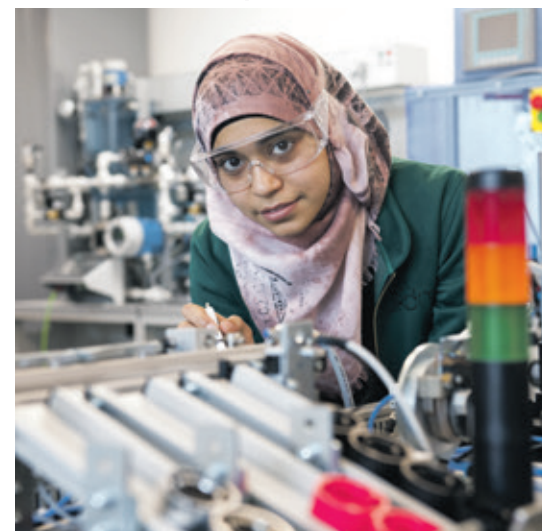
Middlesex’s reach extends beyond its campus, through close work with local schools. Projects include 2000+ 1: a Space Maths Odyssey, funded by the Science and Technology Facilities Council, which has involved 1,000 Barnet secondary age students in the design

of a maths puzzle video game. The University has run Practical Potions sessions introducing primary pupils to chemistry, and free hands-on robotics workshops.

To encourage entrepreneurship among science students, Computer Science Professor George Dafoulas has set up the TIME-CUBE innovation hub. This gives students the chance to work with virtual reality platforms and AI tools developed by Professor Dafoulas’s research group, including a VR solution for overcoming anxiety about public speaking. The TIME-CUBE also connects industry with students enabling them to pitch ideas or find placement opportunities. At a networking event earlier this year, “students arrived as early as 8am for the 10am start, yet their enthusiasm never faded,” says Professor Dafoulas.

This autumn, Middlesex will be representing the UK at the finals of WorldSkills International – the “Skills Olympics” – in Shanghai. Recent Architectural Technology graduate Gabija Gailiunaite and MSc Robotics student Pratham Lohia are in the UK squad, while Team UK’s training managers in four disciplines are Middlesex alumni or staff members: a triumph for North London.

Professor Klaus Dodds, Dean of Science and Technology at Middlesex, says: “Activities like MDX STEM Festival and all the work we do with schools and industry, embody the commitment of our staff and students to enthuse a wide audience about science and technology. Thank you to everyone who helps to stimulate curiosity and spur new topic exploration and encourage a lifelong passion for further discovery.”



Ex-councillor spared prison after conviction for child sex offences

A former Barnet councillor and convicted paedophile has been handed a suspended prison sentence for committing multiple child sex offences.

The decision on Liron Velleman’s sentencing was reached last month at Southwark Crown Court after being postponed in February – when a judge deemed his crimes too serious to be sentenced at magistrates court.

Velleman, a 31-year-old former Labour representative for Whetstone ward, pleaded guilty in January to two charges; attempting to engage in sexual communication with a child, and attempting to cause a child aged 13–15 to look at an image of sexual activity.

Velleman, of Holdsworth Avenue in North Finchley, faced the charges after being caught in a Metropolitan Police sting operation which occurred between 3rd December and 10th December 2024.

During this time the former Labour councillor sent sexual images and texts to a person he believed was a 13-year-old girl called Kaley.

Prior to the sentencing decision on Friday, 20th March, the court heard how Velleman had asked ‘Kaley’ if she was still a virgin and if she’d “ever done a ‘69?’”.

“I hope you don’t mind a hairy chest,” he said before making reference to his pubic hair.

The former councillor also asked ‘Kaley’ how short girls at her school were allowed to wear their skirts. He also described how he had masturbated in a hotel alone during their conversations.

Speaking ahead of the decision, prosecutor Edmond Blackman described Velleman’s interactions with what he thought was an underaged girl as “very sexualised indeed”.

These conversations, he said, included “a short video of an adult male’s erect penis – presumably his own”.

At the sentencing Judge James Lofthouse acknowledged that Velleman’s crimes were “plainly over the



▲ Southwark Crown Court and (right) Liron Velleman

BY JOE IVES, LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER

custodial threshold” and that a prison sentence would be “richly merited”.

He also said Velleman’s claim that he is no longer attracted to children “simply does not make sense”.

Lofthouse said Velleman is clearly still in denial about having a “reckless, vile and frankly deviant interest in children” – and that he needed to accept this.

“To many, it is an admission you are a paedophile,” the judge added.

Speaking of Velleman’s paedophilic behaviour, he said “it is vital you address this, if not for



yourself then for your child”.

“You have a young boy of your own,” Lofthouse later remarked, adding: “Think about if someone did this to your son. You would do very well to reflect on that indeed.”

Defence barrister Scott Brady said Velleman’s life had “fallen into tatters” since the offence. “The catastrophic situation” led Velleman to resign suddenly from Barnet Council in March last year and has now made him estranged from his wife and young son.

Brady said his client immediately

reached out to support organisations after being arrested and has begun therapy to help tackle his issues. He added that the child sex offender has “promise awaiting to be tapped into in the future” despite his current problems.

Citing Velleman’s early guilty plea and engagement with reform programmes and therapy – as well as the current overpopulation of prisons – Judge Lofthouse ultimately gave Velleman an eight-month sentence suspended for 15 months, meaning he has been spared jail.

The judge described the sex offender as a man of previous good character whose being married and having a child made the crimes “all the more inexplicable”. The judge also argued that a custodial sentence would be more likely to hinder than help Velleman’s process of reform.

As well as the suspended sentence, the former Labour councillor is required to be on the sex offender’s register for ten years and is not allowed to be alone with any child, including his own son.

He must also complete 180 hours of community service and pay £337 in court fees by 3rd May.

If Velleman is found to have broken the law or to be in breach of any of his sentence conditions he would likely have to serve his eight-month sentence in prison – as well as potentially face further criminal charges.

Velleman appeared to be relieved as he walked out of the courtroom with his hands tucked in his pockets, accompanied by his parents.

Shortly before, in his closing remarks, Judge Lofthouse had issued a warning: “Make sure I don’t see you here again”.

A Barnet Council spokesperson said: “In Barnet we take safeguarding extremely seriously and we are appalled by the offences committed by Liron Velleman. Our thoughts are with anyone affected by these crimes, and we will continue to work with partners to ensure the highest standards of safeguarding in our communities.”

“The judge argued that a custodial sentence would be more likely to hinder than help Velleman’s process of reform”

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COMMENT

9



Emergency services in Golders Green following last month's attack
Credit: Anna Mahtani

'No other community is forced to hide behind bomb proof doors at their places of worship'

Hendon councillor Shimon Ryde calls for a response to last month's antisemitic arson attack in Golders Green

The unthinkable, but sadly not unexpected, happened early that morning with the sound of explosions at around 1.30am. It took only a few minutes before I received messages from residents and friends informing me that the local Hatzola centre had been hit by an arson attack and four Hatzola ambulances as well as the neighbouring synagogue were in flames.

I quickly dressed and rushed to the centre where I was met by a scene I had been praying I would never witness, a major attack on the north west London Jewish community.

Under police direction, as I assisted residents from a block of flats to a makeshift shelter in a local Jewish community centre, a gas canister in one of the ambulances exploded with such force that we were nearly knocked off our feet.

At the centre volunteers, including Dean Cohen, a colleague and Golders Green ward councillor, had also got the call to assist. We checked on residents and provided blankets, hot drinks and biscuits and tried to reassure. Dean and I took steps to find temporary accommodation for displaced residents in case the fire brigades' containment of the site would prevent

them returning home for a prolonged period.

I walked around talking to people in the community centre and reflected on how the Jewish community had got to this place where fear and violence are now so common they have become part of the normal day.

Back in 2015, I sat in the constituency office of the then MP for Finchley and Golders Green Mike Freer discussing the security of the local Jewish community. The Conservative government had just announced that they would fund security guards for synagogues and other Jewish institutions.

I remarked to Mike that there

was a dire need to provide security also for schools. Mike campaigned hard for this, raising the issue famously at Prime Minister's Questions and ultimately successfully ensuring after much hard work that schools were also included in the arrangements.

However, antisemitism has moved on since 2015, increasing each year to its current record levels. The security package welcomed then by the Jewish community as groundbreaking, today is woefully inadequate.

Antisemitic attacks around the world, including this country in Manchester when, on Yom Kippur, two people were murdered, has left the Jewish community not only on edge but frightened. The recent arrests of two men plotting attacks in London has only heightened the danger felt.

Even with the additional funding from the current government announced recently, men and women in fluorescent jackets, many volunteers, is simply no longer enough.

When I have raised this I am told, and I am sure it is true, that the police are vigilant and have increased their levels locally. However last month's attack in the centre of Golders Green, a stone's throw off the main road, by three men who were able to approach unchallenged proves that whatever security is currently in place it is not enough.

Too long has the Jewish community gone about our daily lives and activities in fear. No other community is forced to hide behind bomb proof doors at their places of worship, no other community is forced to build tall security fences around their schools to protect their children, no other community fears attack when they go out to dine.

As I write, next week is the Jewish festival of Passover, a time when we celebrate our freedom from slavery. It is time for the government to properly provide the visible reassurance and security needed for the north west London Jewish community, allowing us to celebrate Passover without being slaves to the constant fear and danger we currently live under.

Shimon Ryde is a Conservative councillor for Hendon ward

Continued from Page-1

for something to happen in Golders Green and it doesn't come as any surprise," said Cllr Ryde.

The ambulances were parked next to Machzike Hadath Synagogue.

"These are institutions at the centre of our community and thank God nobody's been hurt," he added. "It's not for the community to find solutions but it's for the government to really take seriously the threat that we feel under."

The attacks were condemned by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and other national political leaders. On the morning of the incident, Barnet Council leader Barry Rawlings said: "We are deeply shocked and appalled by this antisemitic attack in the heart of our Jewish community.

"The deliberate targeting of Hatzola's volunteer ambulances, in what the police are treating as a suspected arson attack, is abhorrent. We will do everything in our power to support the police to bring those responsible to justice.

"Our thoughts are first and foremost with those affected – the volunteers who dedicate their time to saving lives and to our wider community who will feel understandably shaken and distressed by this attack.

"Hate crime in any form will not be tolerated in our borough. An attack on one part of our community is an attack on us all. We stand in full solidarity with our Jewish residents and with all the other communities who make up Golders Green and who are feeling vulnerable today as a result of this cowardly act."

On Wednesday, 25th March, the Metropolitan Police announced that two men had been arrested in connection with the attack.

The men, aged 47 and 45, were arrested at addresses in north west London and central London on suspicion of arson with intent to endanger life. They were taken to a London police station with officers carrying out searches of the two addresses.

Following the arrests, Commander Helen Flanagan, head of Counter Terrorism Policing London, which is leading the investigation said: "We have been working around the clock since this appalling attack took place and this has led to these arrests being made this morning.

"This appears to be an important breakthrough in the investigation, but we're also mindful that CCTV footage of the incident suggests there were at least three people involved. We fully recognise the local community will still be concerned and our investigation very much remains active and we will continue to work to identify and seek to arrest all of those who may have been involved."

She added: "I'd like to thank the public and particularly the local Jewish community in the area for their continued support and reiterate our appeal to anyone who might have information that could assist with the investigation to get in touch with us."

ELECTION 2026



Anything could happen as Barnet votes

David Floyd looks back on four years of Labour and ahead to May's local election

The 2022 local election provided a historic moment for Barnet as Labour won a majority at the town hall for the first time since the borough was created in 1965. While Labour's vote only increased by 4% compared to 2018, that was enough for the party to gain 16 seats and leave Barry Rawlings as leader of the council.

The Conservatives under Dan Thomas, now seeking to become Reform first minister of Wales, were out of power after 20 years, having first removed the previous Labour/Lib Dem coalition in 2002.

Labour's weird tax claims

Labour came to power with a manifesto that included five key pledges: to freeze council tax in 2022 and 'keep it low'; invest more in CCTV; protect and enhance green spaces; protect weekly bin collections and finally to "stand up to developers" on the basis that "we need more affordable family homes not tower-block blight".

Some pledges have been fulfilled (on CCTV and bin collections) and opinions may differ on the extent to which the borough's green spaces have been enhanced but it's the other two pledges that have led to the most controversy.

Labour went into the election pledging to refund a 1% increase in the social care precept made by the outgoing Conservative administration in its 2022/23 budget, which had frozen core council tax rates that year.

On arriving in office they soon found that literally refunding the money midway through the financial year would be procedurally complicated and decided to find another way to fulfill the pledge. Then, at least as Labour portrays the situation, came the 'Liz Truss mini budget'.

After the economic shocks of September 2022, the financial outlook for many councils suddenly became more stark. So much so that by the time Barnet Labour came to set its budget for 2023/24, it was in no position to even consider actually cutting taxes. Instead, it contorted its way out of the problem by implementing a combined rise of 3.8% in council tax and social care precept while claiming that it had provided a "refund" of the Conservative increase by not raising council tax by a further 1%.

If that experience caused many residents to develop a tolerance for the preposterous, they would come to need it when engaging with subsequent budget discussions. Whether or not the administration is wholly (or even primarily) to blame, the reality is that taxes have continued to rise, while council leader Barry Rawlings has continued to make ever more implausible claims about his commitment to keeping them low.

Last month, in their final budget before the election,



Barnet Labour has stood up to some developers while at other times remaining seated

Hendon Town Hall
Credit Diamond Geezer via Flickr

Barnet Labour put up taxes by 4.98% with Rawlings bizarrely expressing his pride in keeping the rise 0.01% below the maximum amount allowed without holding a referendum. This amounts to a 15 pence annual saving for a resident of a Band D property. The *Post* can only hope that citizens spend this money wisely.

Standing up to some developers

The final pledge, and the most ambiguous, was the promise that: "We will stand up to developers: we need more affordable family homes not tower-block blight."

In power, Barnet Labour has certainly leaned into the ambiguity. It has definitely stood up to some developers while, at other times, apparently being content to carry out its interactions while remaining fully seated.

The most prominent instances of

standing up have occurred in the past few months, a shift that cynics may suspect overlaps with councillors' fears about the upcoming election result.

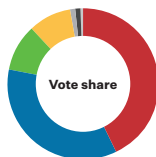
December saw two sets of tower blocks blocked by the council's strategic planning committee with Regal's plan for the Great North Leisure Park and Barratt London's plans for the High Barnet tube station car park both firmly biffed eight to one by a combination of Labour and Conservative councillors.

Residents of virtually anywhere in the UK apart from inner London may have been surprised by the committee's apparently solemnly held view that the bid to develop the Leisure Park, a twelve minute walk from a high street served by ten bus routes and a 25 minute walk from a tube station, needed to be refused at least partly due to its poor transport links.

While both refusals were the culmina-

Election 2022 results

Party	Votes	Percent	Seats
Labour	46070	43.0%	41
Conservative	37608	35.1%	22
Green Party	10570	9.9%	0
Liberal Democrat	10028	9.4%	0
Women's Equality Party	1159	1.1%	0
Independent	1122	1.0%	0
Rejoin EU	465	0.4%	0



Elected leader
Barry Rawlings
Seats won
41

Party
Labour
Seat change
16 ▲

Leader's seat
Friern Barnet
Swing
4.0% ▲



Former leader
Dan Thomas
Seats won
22

Party
Conservative
Seat change
16 ▼

Leader's seat
Finchley Church End
Swing
9.4% ▼

11

ers face four-party contest



This prior support didn't stop Tory councillors on the committee voting against the scheme.

No money, many problems

As its term has continued, the overriding theme of Labour's time in office has been its extraordinary lack of money. If some eyebrows were raised last year, when cabinet member for finance Simon Radford needed to request £55.7million of exceptional financial support (EFS) to balance the 2024/25 budget, they would have been raised even further following this year's request for EFS of £79.3m.

Labour blames the need to use EFS – which means it receives permission from the government to borrow money to cover its costs – on the rising bills for services that it is legally obliged to deliver such as temporary accommodation for homeless people, services for vulnerable children and adult social care.

The Conservatives can hardly claim that this problem doesn't exist. They were in power in 2012 when officers shared the Barnet 'Graph of Doom', a powerpoint slide predicted that the council's entire income would be spent on children's services and social care in 20 years' time.

However, this year's bailout comes after a central government review of council funding to ensure it is "fair". Whether or not Labour is to blame, they currently seem short of serious ideas about how the borough will ever be able to balance books other than, as the Conservatives warn, through huge council tax rises.

Aside from being engulfed by an ongoing financial crisis, council leader Rawlings has faced a smorgasbord of additional tribulations: ranging from those which have raised serious questions about his leadership to those which even many of his critics would admit were beyond his control.

The former include the revelations in a Sky News documentary in November that three young people who had been in the council's care had died shortly

after leaving it. Whether or not the council was significantly at fault for what happened, opposition councillors and campaigners were deeply unhappy about the apparent lack of transparency in the council's response – and Rawlings ended up on Sky News explaining why he wasn't going to resign.

Two other challenges arose from within the Labour group itself. At time of writing, the party's former councillor for Whetstone Liron Velleman was given a suspended prison sentence for child sex offences last month, following investigations into which had prompted his mysterious, abrupt departure from the town hall last year.

Prior to that, the council's cabinet member for finance Ammar Naqvi was fired from his role by Rawlings after the *Post* revealed that he had claimed to be a professor at UCL Medical School, when the reality was that he had never worked there.

Four parties

Not too long ago, this year's election was shaping up to be another straight fight between the Conservatives and Labour. In 2022, the local Lib Dems confirmed their growing local moribundity while the Greens failed to make a significant breakthrough. Reform did not even contest the election.

Now the picture is quite different. Both Reform and the Greens have gained councillors through defections and are planning to run full slates in May. The national polls suggest both could have a big impact but neither have yet made a major breakthrough in a by-election in the borough.

The upshot of this is, while it still seems likely either Rawlings' Labour or the Conservatives, led by Peter Zinkin, will ultimately form the next administration, the other parties will definitely have a big impact on which of them gets to do so and may even end up in a coalition.

The potential third and fourth party surge means that it's harder than usual to say which wards are marginals and which

“
This is a recipe for confusion containing many different flavours
”

are safe bets.

For example, Labour won Woodhouse ward in North Finchley by a wide margin in 2022 but the Greens have strong home of a breakthrough there, with local candidates George Ttoouli and Charli Thompson having been heavily involved in the successful Our North Finchley campaign.

Similarly, the Conservatives finished well ahead in Hendon ward last time around but Reform, whose Barnet leader is current Hendon councillor Mark Shooter, may fancy their chances there (despite the Tories comfortably holding one of the seats in a by-election last year).

Marginal wards last time around included Barnet Vale, which elected two Labour councillors and one Conservative; Brunswick Park, Childs Hill and East Barnet (all narrowly won by Labour), and Edgwarebury (narrowly Conservative). But, for example, what impact could a strong Reform showing have

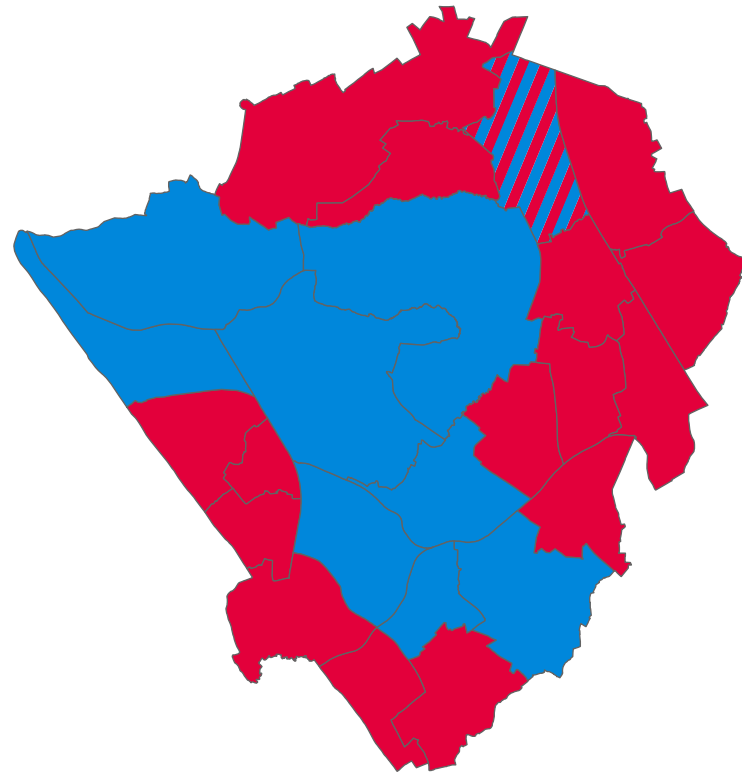
in Mill Hill, where the Conservative candidates were around 500 votes ahead last time?

There's even a suggestion that Friern Barnet ward, represented by Rawlings and where Labour won by miles last time, could see a Green threat from candidates including Linda Lusingu, the former Labour councillor who defected to the party this year.

Above all, this is a recipe for confusion containing many different flavours but, on the plus side, the lack of certainty about the result means that each vote is unusually important. So now's a great time to find out more about the contest in your ward and make sure you have your say in May.

Note: Barnet Post understands that Your Party and the Liberal Democrats will be standing in May's election in Barnet however we have so far been unsuccessful in our attempts to contact their representatives.

Election 2022 results



tion of strong local campaigns by Our North Finchley and The Barnet Society (among others), local campaigning was not enough to prevent another equally controversial scheme getting the go ahead.

In Edgware, developers Ballymore and TfL received the green light for their plans to build over 3,300 homes in the town centre. Being next to the tube station, these properties will (in theory) have good transport links although the scheme does also involve knocking down the bus station and building a highly controversial underground bus garage.

Labour claimed they had no choice about backing the scheme because it was part of the Local Plan that the previous Conservative administration had initiated.

FEATURES

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Why local democracy matters more than people think

figures on a page. They shape the support available to residents and the quality of services people rely on every day. The council warned that this pressure could also slow the delivery of some services and projects.

In March, the council approved its budget for the 2026/27 financial year while facing significant financial pressure, particularly from rising housing costs and increasing demand for social care. The budget included a 2.98% increase in general council tax and a further 2% adult social care precept.

While it is often the council, not parliament, that makes the choices people feel most directly in daily life, low turnout can also affect political representation. In the UK's 'first past the post' system, the party that receives the most votes in each ward wins the seat on the council. When fewer residents participate, it becomes easier for one party to dominate the council even if other viewpoints exist within the community.

The word 'democracy' itself comes from the Greek words *demos*, meaning people, and *kratos*, meaning power. When turnout is low, that political power can end up being exercised by a relatively small share of the population.

That is why local elections matter. When people vote for councillors, they are also choosing the people who decide how local money is spent and which services are treated as priorities. When turnout is low, major local decisions can end up being shaped by only a small share of the electorate. That is exactly why local democracy deserves more attention, not less.

As Barnet approaches its local elections on Thursday, 7th May, it is worth treating them with the attention they deserve. Council decisions may not dominate national headlines, but they shape the places people live, the services they rely on and the future of the borough itself. Residents who want more information about the election, including how to register and where to vote, can find it on the Barnet Council website.

To check whether they are already registered, residents can contact Barnet Electoral Services at ero@barnet.gov.uk or on 020 8359 5577 or go to: www.barnet.gov.uk/elections-and-voting/local-government-elections-thursday-7-may-2026

Registering to vote takes only a few minutes and can be completed online. Readers can scan the QR code below to register directly.



With council elections taking place next month, Vasiliki Papadima reminds us why voting matters

Many of the decisions that shape everyday life in Barnet are made not in Westminster but in the local council chamber. Yet far fewer people vote in local elections than in national ones. In Barnet's 2022 local election, turnout was just 37.9%, and in some wards it was even lower, including 27.4% in Burnt Oak.

In boroughs like Barnet, the council plays a direct role in shaping the environment people live in and the services they depend on. Decisions about housing, planning, public services and social care are made locally. These are not distant political questions. They influence the streets people walk through, the services families rely on and the support available to vulnerable residents.

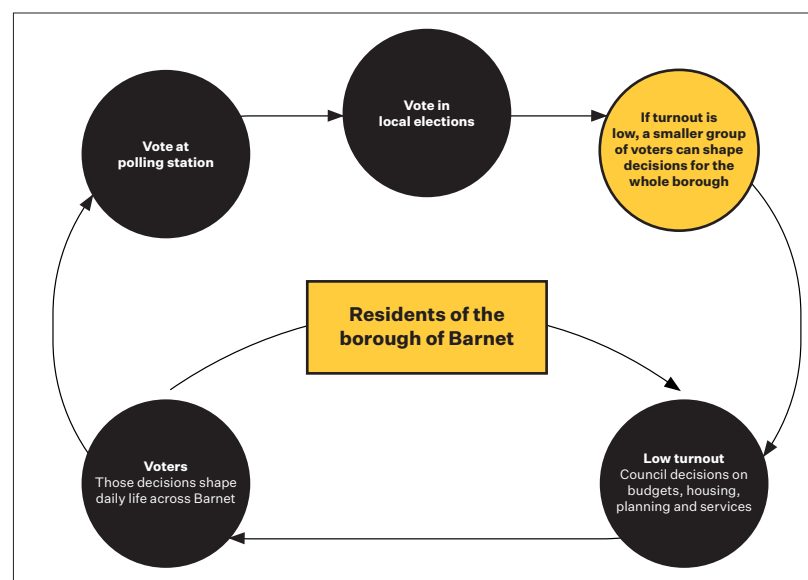
Housing and planning decisions are one of the clearest examples of how local councils shape everyday life. In 2025, Barnet Council adopted a new Local Plan that will guide development in the borough until 2036 and aims to deliver around 44,000 new homes. Plans like this influence where housing is built, how neighbourhoods change and what infrastructure will be needed as the population grows. When fewer people vote in local elections, fewer residents are involved in choosing the councillors who ultimately make these long-term decisions.

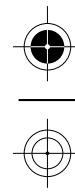
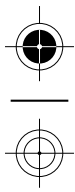
Large regeneration projects show this influence even more clearly. One of the most significant is Brent Cross Town, a redevelopment project expected to deliver around 6,700 homes alongside offices, parks and community spaces. The project is also expected to support thousands of jobs in the area. Decisions of this scale show how council planning choices shape economic opportunities, housing supply and the physical landscape of a borough for decades.

Local government is also responsible for many of the services people rely on most, from social care to local community support. When money is tight, councillors have to decide what to protect, what to reduce and what may have to wait.

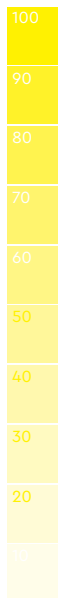
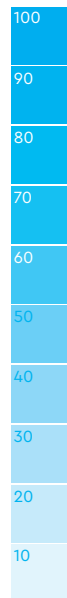
“Planning decisions are a clear example of how councils shape everyday life”

Barnet has already faced these choices. In late 2024, the council said it was dealing with serious financial pressure, particularly from rising housing and social care costs. Local political decisions are therefore not just about

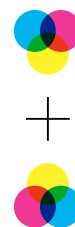




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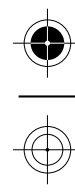
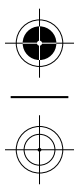
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FEATURES

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Learn to tattoo safely in Barnet

“We won’t make an artist out of you, but we will help you tattoo safely and conscientiously,” says Julie Russell, co-owner of Old Marine Arts Group, a tattoo and art studio in Colney Hatch Lane. Together with licensed tattoo artist TomCatTatt, she has designed a half-day course to help raise the standards of tattoo practice.

She adds: “Becoming a tattoo artist isn’t just about delivering a beautiful piece, it’s also about preventing infections, developing good technique, and offering clients a safe space.”

During the four hour course, participants will learn the fundamentals: tattoo safety and hygiene, using rotary tattoo machines, choosing needles, how to set up a professional tattoo station and hands-on practice on synthetic skin in a licensed studio.

Former microbiologist Julie teaches the basics of her field, client assessment and consent, infection prevention and hygiene, environmental cleanliness and contamination control. Finally, “I make a point of explaining precisely UK guidelines and legislation around tattooing.”

TomCatTatt explains: “Barnet has very high standards when it comes to safe practice. Most courses teach the rules but don’t really explain why they matter. That’s where we come in.”

The former criminal defence lawyer changed career three years ago. “You can

Old Marine Arts Group in Colney Hatch Lane offers a half-day training course for aspiring tattooists based on the science of safe practice, reports Leila Davaud



buy a tattoo machine online and learn from tutorials but without proper training, it’s very easy to pick up bad habits that put clients at risk.”

Now a licensed artist teaching others, he sees those risks in action. “We had a really talented artist on the course, great designs and real ability but because he’d been practising on lower quality fake skin and without enough experience, he didn’t realise he was going too deep and ripping the skin. Once he understood what was happening, his technique completely transformed. The results are awesome.”

Throughout the course, Tom will introduce different techniques and how to avoid common mistakes.

He adds: “This course is not a replacement for an apprenticeship, it is not an art lesson, it does not give you a qualification. However, you will gain a clearer understanding of whether tattooing could be the career for you. You’ll also have the opportunity for supervised follow-up sessions if you decide to work towards becoming a professional tattoo artist.

“Our goal isn’t to make money from this but to help our field evolve in good conditions. We tattoo a lot of people, we are responsible for what happens to them once they are out of our studio. Let’s not forget it!”

“Barnet has very high standards when it comes to safe practice”

The course costs £200, with a £40 deposit payable on booking. Old Marine Arts Group is located at 95 Colney Hatch Lane, Muswell Hill, N10 1LR. To book or enquire, call 07551 560439 or email oldmarinearts@gmail.com

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FEATURES

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From Mill Hill to Dragons' Den, Flavour Bombs' quest to take over the world

BY LEILA DAVAUD

“It is surreal,” says Tina Faghihi-Hallam, on a rare break from her business. She founded Flavour Bombs and, alongside her husband Olly Hallam, has taken it from a Mill Hill dream to TikTok sensation to television success.

Their products have seduced food lovers across the world, offering ready-to-use bases for homemade Mexican birria, coconut curry, butter chicken and more... One flavour bomb in a pan with water and voilà!

“We launched in 2024 with a simple hope: to bring people together through great food,” Tina explains.

“Cooking shouldn’t have to be complicated to be good or to be shared with the people you love.”

Barely six months after launching, the BBC *Dragons’ Den* production team came calling. “It was insane, but we applied,” she recalls. After needing to build a little more experience, the couple featured on the show on 5th February this year, pitching their business to five multimillionaires in hopes of securing investment.

They rehearsed their pitch the entire

journey from Barnet to Manchester. “My heart was thumping so hard,” Tina admits. “It was nerve-wracking. When we stepped in front of them they were so silent, I was unsettled.”

But the effort paid off: entrepreneur and investor Peter Jones offered them £50,000 for a 25% stake. The couple initially accepted on air, but after careful consideration, decided to walk away. “We thought it was a lot to give away,” she says simply.

If passing up the investment felt daunting at first, what followed left little time for doubt. Within 24 hours of the episode airing, Flavour Bombs received 6,000 orders totalling 14,000 individual units.

“We hoped it would boost sales, but there was no way to gauge just how much,” Tina says. The business, usually well-equipped to handle demand, was

“When we stepped in front of them they were so silent”



Tina and Olly from Flavour Bombs

forced to switch to a pre-order model. Normal service, she promises, will resume from the second week of April.

The growth has reshaped the business entirely. The couple have moved production out of their home kitchen and into a dedicated facility, and have hired two full-time manufacturing staff and a part-timer. They have also secured accreditation to sell in supermarkets, with international distribution now firmly in their sights.

“We haven’t really taken the time to reflect on this journey until now,” Tina admits, “but it is absolutely incredible.”

Flavour Bombs already ships to individual customers around the world: Kuwait, Singapore, Australia and beyond. “It is quite emotional to think that what we created in our house is now on tables across the world,” she says. “Food brings people together. I’ve never been more convinced of that than I am right now.”

Find out more about Flavour Bombs at: flavourbombs.com

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HENDON

HMO approved despite councillor's objection

BY JOE IVES, LOCAL
DEMOCRACY REPORTER

A HOUSE IN MULTIPLE occupation (HMO) in Hendon has been formally approved after previously being rejected for being potentially "harmful" to the local area.

The decision, reached at a Barnet Council planning committee meeting last month, will officially permit a former family home on Babington Road to be used as a five-bed HMO.

Speaking ahead of the decision on Wednesday, 11th March, Joe Henry, the agent working on behalf of the application, said the property is already being used as a HMO anyway. He argued that the fact the house is being used this way "in itself demonstrates demand need for HMO accommodation".

Henry said the property has been licensed by the council as a HMO since March 2021 and argued that the owner would now be immune from enforcement action, citing a four-year immunity rule.

A similar application for the property at 48 Babington Road was



48 Babington Road Credit Google

rejected in May last year. Explaining the decision at the time, council officers said it would mean a loss of an in-need family house and would contribute to "a harmful concentration of houses in multiple occupation in an area of poor public transport accessibility".

The approved application is retrospective. It follows the completion of a parking survey that found there are enough spaces nearby already and no more would be needed as a result of the HMO.

In addition, Transport for London (TfL) has since changed its description of the location, giving it a better public transport rat-

ing. The property is just under half-a-kilometre from Hendon Central Station.

Planning officers now argue there is a valid "need" for the HMO, with Middlesex University less than 200m from the property. As a result, they said the application has "overcome" previous reasons for refusal.

Hendon ward councillor Alex Prager requested that the application be discussed by the planning committee. In a statement read out at the meeting, the Conservative member raised concerns about the loss of a single-family home, saying it was contrary to the council's Local Plan.

Speaking ahead of the decision, the planning agent voiced disagreement, saying those policies were part of an old local plan and no longer valid.

He also noted that nearby 24 Babington Road was granted planning permission for a HMO on appeal in October 2024.

The application is listed on the council's planning portal with reference 25/4814/RCU.

CHILDS HILL

MP launches free legal advice pop-up

BY ELLIE BENNETT

CONSTITUENTS IN FINCHLEY and Golders Green are now able to receive free legal advice as part of a new initiative set up by their local MP.

Sarah Sackman and her team hosted their first pop-up advice centre last month in Childs Hill, with local residents invited to the event at the Jewish Vegetarian Society building in Finchley Road.

The pop-ups will offer residents who do not have access to legal aid the chance to seek support from lawyers in the local community who are volunteering their time to provide advice.

Sackman said: "Access to justice should not be determined by how much money you have. I know from my own experience the importance of making legal aid accessible. I am proud to see our community turning out to help each other, using their skills and knowledge as a practical force for good".

At the first event, residents were



The first pop up legal advice session
Credit Office of Sarah Sackman MP

given help with understanding their rights and what resources are available to them. The sessions focused on issues related to families, housing and employment law.

Mia, a constituent who received free legal advice, said: "This event was really helpful for me. I've been experiencing ongoing issues in a criminal case and having someone listen and explain all my options made a real difference. I felt heard and supported and am now ready to take the next steps."

Moira, a criminal solicitor and volunteer, added: "It was very

rewarding to be able to give back to the community. Many people don't realise their rights and the options available to them, and being able to help bridge that gap is exactly what important initiatives like this are about."

This initiative comes at a time when access to legal support is severely limited and constituents regularly write to Sackman about legal issues they are facing in their home or workplace, without a clear route to resolve it. To find out more go to: sarahsackman.com/free-legal-advice-centre

CPZs allow residents with permits to park in marked-out bays



UNDERHILL

Council agrees to look into local concerns after CPZ slammed as 'a mess'

BY JOE IVES, LOCAL
DEMOCRACY REPORTER

BARNET COUNCIL HAS agreed to commission a report into an unpopular "experimental" parking scheme after a campaign by local residents.

The decision regarding the controlled parking zone (CPZ) in Underhill was reached at a full council meeting last month, following a deputation by a representative from a local residents group.

The local authority began an "experimental trial" of a 16-road CPZ in south Underhill in November last year. It means anyone wishing to park in the area needs a permit between 8am and 6:30pm, Monday to Saturday.

The scheme, currently in its "statutory consultation period", was unpopular before it began – with only 35% of affected residents polled by the council in favour of the CPZ.

Speaking ahead of the council's decision on Thursday, 5th March, Gina Theodorou from Underhill Residents Group argued that the new parking permit zone is "arbitrary" and dangerous, and mainly displaces parking

issues from nearby, including Barnet Hospital.

"The vast majority of parking bays are completely empty," said Theodorou. She explained how residents and visitors are parking on their drives or on the pavement to avoid paying for permits, making the area even more unsafe for pedestrians.

The Underhill South CPZ scheme, referred to as "experimental" by Barnet Council, requires residents in the area to buy permits to use the spaces on the roads next to their homes.

Alan Schneiderman, the council's cabinet member for environment, reiterated that the current Underhill CPZ is "an experimental scheme" with an ongoing consultation which will end on 15th June this year. He said he hoped that, following a review and analysis of responses to the CPZ, a decision would be made "as quickly as possible".

Following a vote by full council, Cllr Schneiderman agreed to ask officers to write a report on the issues raised by Underhill Residents Group. This report is now set to be discussed at a future council meeting.

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18 FEATURES

Online eaters tuck in to Finchley roast

Have you ever watched three blokes eat a whole roast lamb in an hour? Me neither, before last month.

The life of a journalist is never boring. One week I am interviewing members of Finchley’s Iranian diaspora as they celebrate the death of Ayatollah Khamenei, the next I am watching feats of athletic prowess that I never imagined possible or even imagined.

On Wednesday, 11th March, Goda Restaurant in Ballards Lane hosted something truly impressive: three competitive eaters versus a whole roast lamb, plus sides. This is around 15 kilograms of food, usually served for groups of twelve people and, not just that; they must eat it in one hour.

Goda is a place I’ve been to once – it was fantastic – and ever since then I have dreamed of going back, all the more so as they tantalise me with their daily array of spit-roasted meats every time I walk past.

Apprehensive and a little bit peckish, I walk into Goda and I’m hit with two things: the aroma of a whole roasted lamb that has been turned over for five hours on a spit and two YouTubers, Max of Max vs. Food and Nick of Lifting Weights Cleaning Plates, running around manically, filming about ten versions of their intro. This is it; I am stepping behind the curtain of competitive eating on YouTube.

In truth they are very welcoming and ask me if I need anything. Then they quickly scurry off to film some content outside and across the road. I sit down and look around the restaurant which is empty for the purposes of this momentous occasion, except, of course, the tripods and cameras set up pointing at the table numbering into the tens.

The third YouTuber, Franco, of Franco’s Feasts, arrives in a much more relaxed fashion (he does have a videographer to help him). He laughs and shakes his head as he watches the others shoot their videos outside, almost as if he can’t believe that this is their life as relatively successful YouTubers with sizeable followings.

In all the hubbub and preparation for the main event, I managed to get a few minutes with each to ask them some questions. Max is currently the number one competitive eater in the UK and number eight globally. He has over 88,000 subscribers on YouTube as well as having Instagram and Facebook accounts under the name Max vs Food. While Franco and Nick have been competitive eaters for about two years, running social media channels with around



When some competitive eaters came to Finchley last month to eat loads of roast lamb, Luc Gauci Green went along

▲
The YouTubers tuck in
Credit Luc Gauci Green

nine thousand subscribers each.

All three are big on maintaining a healthy relationship to food and their body, despite the size of the meals they eat. They all go to the gym almost daily (Nick used to be a competitive bodybuilder) and food challenges are coupled with low calorie meals on either side of it.

Max puts it simply: “It’s all about calories in and calories out.” He also acknowledges, “the easy part is the eating but to be honest the work that goes into

it, before and afterwards, is pretty insane”, usually eating 1,000-1,500 calories a day outside of his one to two weekly challenges; walking about 20,000 steps a day; going to the gym for one or two hours a day and, in the case of this challenge, fasting for the past 34 hours.

Franco spoke a little of his preparation for the challenge, such as “eating large quantities of low-calorie food, like a copious amount of vegetables”.

Nick also provided some sage

advice: “You’ve got to get hungry. You’ve got to come hungry and the rest will take care of itself.”

The reasons why they eat competitively were similar: they all have big appetites, love food and just seemed to fall into it, watching their popularity and channels grow. The key thing is entertainment and connection.

They don’t shy away from the weirdness of eating huge amounts of food on camera and the loyal followers who watch it. When asked why people keep coming back, Nick joked: “I don’t know, I think there’s something equally as wrong with them as there probably is with us. But luckily people do want to watch us so we’re going to keep making it.”

Franco said: “It gives people the opportunity to not only see what the human body can do but also people want to go to the restaurants... In some ways it’s a bit of a food review and a food challenge all in one.”

Max adds: “I love watching it as well, I’m massively into the community. I think it showcases pretty crazy food. It’s really lovely to see the different types of food. I think it just brings people together.”

The initial start time was 4pm, delayed to 4:45pm as the YouTubers took close up shot after close up shot and thumbnail after thumbnail. After watching this for 45 minutes, I started to worry that I’d never get out of there and that the lamb after all the hours of preparation would be cold.

Eventually they began, shovelling mouthfuls of meat cave-man style into their mouths. It was like a factory line production as their hands kept a steady stream of lamb to the mouth area regardless of whether the previous mouthful had been finished. They were so intently focused on the lamb that they had to be reminded of the sauces to go with it.

The thing I didn’t expect was the silence – quite obvious when you think about it – of watching people eat. The real-life experience doesn’t come with their customary voiceovers, which I have to say does add a lot. Despite this, the event actually flew by. The speed at which they could eat was truly impressive and hard to fathom.

On the whole they are kind and likeable. Just normal blokes who like to keep fit and happen to have huge appetites. They were polite and complimentary of the food and staff throughout the occasion, not just when the cameras were on.

“Did they finish it?” I hear you ask. You’ll have to watch their videos to find out.

“The thing I didn’t expect was the silence of watching people eat”

SPORT

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Cockfosters (in blue) defeated Droylsden 4-2 in the quarter final Credit @els_photo_graphy

Wembley 'dream' just one win away for Cockfosters FC

Club committee member Tommy Rose on how the Spartan South Midlands League Premier Division minnows reached the semi-finals of the FA Vase

Cockfosters FC are now just one win away from competing at Wembley Stadium for the FA Vase.

The Chalk Lane club's remarkable cup journey took another dramatic step forward with a superb late surge to defeat Droylsden FC 4-2 and book their place in the semi-final of the competition, which is contested between clubs at the fifth and sixth steps of the non-league pyramid.

The quarter-final fixture on Saturday, 28th February, presented one of the toughest assignments of the campaign. A lengthy trip north to Greater Manchester awaited Gavin Kelsey's side, who faced an established and experienced Droylsden team in front of another large and expectant

crowd. But as they have throughout this cup run, Cockfosters rose to the occasion.

In a fiercely contested match, the sides were locked together deep into the second half before Cockfosters produced a decisive late spell to pull clear. A goal apiece from Conrad Holland and, on his debut, Ollie Sotoyinbo, proved decisive. It followed first-half goals from Cory Ugbomah and Kendall Gyamfi.

The two late goals secured a memorable 4-2 victory, sparking celebrations among the travelling supporters who had made the long journey to witness another historic moment in the club's season.

Next up are Kent-based Punjab United FC, who await in a two-legged semi-final. For the first time in the club's history,

Cockfosters will compete in a last-four tie with a place in the Wembley final at stake.

The first leg will be played at Chalk Lane on Saturday, 28th March, with the return leg scheduled for the following weekend on Saturday, 4th April. Interest in the home fixture has been extraordinary, with tickets selling rapidly and a capacity crowd expected as the local community turns out in force to support the club.

After a cup run defined by late goals, penalty shoot-out drama and determined performances on the road, Cockfosters now find themselves just 180 minutes away from the biggest stage in English football.

For a club that has already made history this season, the dream of Wembley is now closer than ever.

Inconsistent Bees comfortable in mid-table

Nick Sandamas on Barnet's dwindling play-off aspirations

Whichever way you look at it, Barnet are in a good position, mid-table with no fear of being dragged into a relegation scrap.

However, the Bees' results continue to be inconsistent and not knowing what team will turn up from one game to another has certainly derailed their play off chances.

An added frustration has been the continuing touchline ban for manager Dean Brennan, who has been unable to shout instructions from the bench and been confined to watching each game from elsewhere in the ground.

The Bees had rounded off February off with Nnamdi Oforbhor scoring the only goal to secure an important win over fellow play off contenders Chesterfield (which made it two wins in a row) but last month started badly with a 2-0 defeat at Salford City, both goals coming late in the first half.

This was followed by a game against strugglers Newport County that again, as has happened too often this season, saw Barnet take the lead but fail to capitalise.

Callum Stead put them ahead but the Welsh side struck two unanswered goals in the second half to leave The Hive with all three points and condemn the hosts to a seventh home league defeat of the season.

Fellow strugglers Crawley Town followed and, despite Mark Shelton giving them the lead just short of the

hour mark, Danilo Orsi scored a late penalty to ensure the points were shared to leave the men in black and amber in twelfth spot.

Second-placed MK Dons were next for the Bees in a lunchtime showdown that, on paper, looked a daunting task against a side who were second in the table and unbeaten in 13 games. As it turned out, the North Londoners turned the form book upside down to come from behind to claim a 3-1 victory.

Jon Mellish gave MK an early lead following an error by keeper Slicker but goals either side of the break by Danny Collinge, Kabongo Tshimanga and Idris Kanu fired the Bees to victory to reignite their play off aspirations.

They are now five points off the final play-off spot with seven games remaining and this result will have given them plenty of confidence as they finished March with the visit of third-placed Cambridge United amid hopes for another good result.

And, as we go into the last full month of games with the gaffer now back in the dugout, the Bees begin April with Easter encounters with leaders Bromley, then Fleetwood. This is followed by further fixtures against Barrow, Notts County and Gillingham, all important games against teams at the top and bottom of the standings.

One other piece of good news last month was for Sierra Leone's Idris Kanu who received an international call up for the first time since 2022. He joins up with the Leone Stars for their friendlies against Oman and Azerbaijan. It's a well-deserved call up for the winger who has been rewarded for his consistent form for the Bees.



The Bees took on Crawley last month Credit Nick Sandamas



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