

## Harlesden Neighbourhood Forum

Notes prepared to describe the (generally indifferent) effects of the OPDC on Harlesden Town Centre 2015-2022

HNF was formed in 2014 and designated in 2015. As our southern boundary follows the Brent borough boundary and, in early negotiations, the OPDC invited us to include the whole Willesden Junction Station area our area includes parts of the OPDC, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and mainly Brent.

Early information from the OPDC sketch out a plan that included substantial redevelopment of Willesden Junction, the principal station for Harlesden, although Harlesden Station itself is included as the westernmost point of our area.

The comprehensive redevelopment of the Car Giant site promised a significant lift to local population numbers while not presenting major retail competition. This competition is already present at the massive Westfield in White City. Talk of new roads, new access to the whole site via a bridge over the West Coast Main Line, a *High Street* that would stretch down to (and over) the canal, giving easy access to the new HS2 station were welcomed. Indeed on the Car Giant masterplan conceived in 2016 even showed a major cultural centre (Science Museum West was mooted).

Talk at that time was of a new Local Plan in place by 2017. The Harlesden Neighbourhood Plan was also being developed simultaneously, which meant the OPDC's emerging Local Plan was having material effects on our thinking.

However, by the end of 2016 the sluggish pace of a serious OPDC strategy for the whole area was causing problems, so Car Giant pulled out of the process. What strategy there was, that of a high density development around the HS2 station with lower heights and densities around a *Sensitive Edge* was collapsing.

Developers rushed to secure sites and consents to build tall buildings the length of Scrubs Lane (a sensitive edge!). So much so that the Scrubs Lane Masterplan was written backwards to accommodate permissions already granted. The (now notorious) City Mission Church site at 2 Scrubs was not included as a development site in the Harlesden Neighbourhood Plan because the OPDC had already granted planning permission for a 20 storey block.

Construction of three of the tall buildings on Scrubs Lane is now well underway all without additional social or transport infrastructure required to support the new residents. A new Overground Station at Hythe Road won't be built putting increased pressure on Willesden Junction Station - which an OPDC supporting study described as **at capacity** in 2017.

Subsequent transport studies indicate greater bus frequency, but all these route through Harlesden Town Centre increasing congestion and pollution.

Indeed by leaving Car Giant and EMR in place (Powerday was always expected to stay for the 25 year redevelopment period) the congestion and pollution caused by the huge lorries servicing these businesses continues to blight the town centre. A new pollution monitoring station has just been introduced. An existing monitoring site led the GLA itself to announce that Manor Park Road (by a primary school) had one of the highest levels Nox and particulate pollution levels in the capital.

The collapse of the proposal for a new walking/cycling bridge over the West Coast Main Line meant that the redevelopment of the Network Rail-owned EMR site couldn't go ahead and a comprehensive redevelopment of the tired Willesden Junction Station were shelved.

To be fair proposals to improve access to the station from the Harrow Road and removing the narrow footpath and steep stairs are still in the plan. These are vital to accommodate the certain increase in footfall from Scrubs Lane developments being built as I and will be complete in 2023.

Improvements to Harrow Road access from WJ were also vital to regenerating the very end of Harlesden High Street and potential redevelopment sites were identified in our Local Plan.

The main entrance to Willesden Junction Station is from the eponymous Station Road to the west. Apart from being called *Willesden* for *Harlesden's* main transport link, the route from the station to Harlesden town centre is neither welcoming or well signposted.

In developing our Neighbourhood Plan we sought to establish a much more active frontage along the length of Station Road towards the Jubilee Clock. The street is already a wide mix of retail, residential and office accommodation. And there is constant pressure to convert retail to residential - something firmly resisted in the plan. We also fought hard to relocate the Station Road bus garage and use the space for active street use and residential (which had been lost from Car Giant) However the OPDC was adamant this small isolated patch should remain SIL.

In the latest versions of the Local Plan the residential focus has been switched to the so-called Western Lands. Large areas that are currently being developed by HS2 to facilitate the construction of Old Oak Station and tunnelling. HS2 are unlikely to vacate these areas until the middle of the next decade. Then add on construction times and the many benefits to Station Road and Harlesden - just minutes walk away - are unlikely to be realised for 15-20 years.

The OPDC's Early Activation Plan announced in 2017 (yes, honestly) has yet to bear any significant benefits. Some modest grants have been given to Harlesden organisations, including HNF, for projects like lamp-post banners and Christmas lights in 2018 and 2019 but these are generally time-limited so difficult to incorporate into strategy.

Others such as cosmetic changes to Willesden Junction Station and better access to the canal have only just broken ground after 5 years of talk. A project to encourage use of the Canal Towpath in Park Royal (just outside the HNF area) is still at the consultation phase but may bring marginal community benefits.

At the start of the process conversations were regular, Harlesden Neighbourhood Forum was a founder member of the Grand Union Alliance and meetings were regularly held at All Saints Church in Harlesden.

Regular updates and consultations have become less frequent, although obviously the pandemic has had a material effect here. Even the employment of several Harlesden residents and a move of offices in Wembley does not seem to have had much effect. Discussions with the Harlesden Town Centre manager may be more convenient but any progress is not widely shared.

Overall the serious lack of progress to the Harlesden borders means business as usual, without any of the benefits that might have been expected after 7 years of work on both sides. Almost all of it voluntary on the Harlesden side. Despite regular requests to the OPDC, through the GUA, for financial help to support community admin.

On the negative side such developments as there have been, Oaklands, Mitre Car, North Kensington Gate, will only add to the stress on public services within Harlesden and Brent. Five of the six nearest doctors' surgeries to Scrubs Lane are in Brent.

The scandalous behaviour of the developers at 2 Scrubs Lane in evicting a Church, Nursery and food bank is no doubt described elsewhere, but it is largely Harlesden residents who will suffer. It remains to be seen whether the OPDC will be as good as its word and prevent redevelopment of the site without provision for the Pentecostal Church and community nursery.

As Harlesden Neighbourhood Forum commences a boundary review and revisions to the Neighbourhood Plan (adopted by local referendum in 2019) we expect to continue to engage with the OPDC but more in hope than expectation.

Colin George  
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