

Text of introduction to Basement Examination

Cllr Coleridge, Cabinet Member for Planning Policy, will say:

I would like to stress how very important this examination is for this Council and for all the residents in Kensington & Chelsea . The whole issue for basement development is a very, very important matter for us. Without any doubt the construction of basements, and the subsequent effect that such large scale excavations inevitably have on immediate neighbours and the wider local community, has been the single greatest cause of concern our residents have expressed in living memory.

Planning applications which included basements were running at 450 last year and that figure is still growing. In 2010 when our current Core Strategy policy came in, it was only 180. We've built up a lot of experience in handling these proposals, and now is the time to look again at the policy in the light of our experience.

Every place is unique, but Kensington and Chelsea does genuinely have a claim to be different. We have the highest residential property values in the country. We also have the highest household density, the tightest built environment and 70% of the borough is conservation area. Some property owners have the resources to spend huge sums on their houses. Some want to enhance the value of property. Others are simply households wishing to extend. Basements are built under large villas, small terraced houses and even mews houses with the narrowest of accesses.

So we have massive excavation work going on right next door to elderly residents, families with young children, people who work from home, doctors' surgeries and other quiet activities, and we have basements built next to people who could never afford to spend that kind of money themselves and who cannot understand why others need to do so. Imagine that going on next door for several months. If you put those facts together you will understand that we have the most enormous pressure from all sides.

In most parts of the country, even most parts of London, the impact of construction is seen as a temporary and passing phase. Planning authorities don't give a lot of weight to it.

But this borough is different. You will see on your site visit, if you haven't already, whole streets with several basement excavations on the go. These are in otherwise quiet residential areas with a lot of on-street parking and not much manoeuvring space. Planning normally tries to keep noisy uses that generate heavy traffic out of residential areas. Continual basement development here has the same impact as a permanent, noisy, traffic generating industry in a residential street.

So we would really like you to understand why, in this borough, we are using planning policy to help to rein in the scale of basement development. Not stopping it completely, but applying the brakes. We simply cannot operate on the basis of planning, highways or environmental health enforcement officers going out and serving notices. We cannot operate on the basis of site-by-site ad hoc agreements. No one will know where they stand and we will need an army of staff to deal with the

consequences. It is far better to have a statement of planning policy, clear to everyone at the outset. Limiting basements to 50% of the garden and a single storey compared with what it is now, 85% and unlimited depth, will help to cut down the amount of spoil and the number of heavy lorry movements, and in many cases the duration and impact of construction.

The policy has other important intentions too, dealing with character and appearance, listed buildings, structural stability, trees, gardens and ecology, sustainable drainage and the impact on carbon emissions – but we really want you to appreciate that construction impact is a very important factor in all this.

In developing our proposed policy, we gave a great deal of thought to the balance that needs to be struck. Quite a few of our residents have said that they would like us to stop all basement development. We thought carefully about this, but we felt that we ought to, on balance, welcome the investment that basement development brings to our housing stock and to the borough. We don't want to stop families from making the best of their homes, and in a borough which is densely built up and 70% conservation area, it is not always easy to expand outwards or upwards. So basement development plays an important part in allowing households to expand.

Basement development also supports Kensington and Chelsea's businesses. The Borough is in a unique position between Heathrow and central London and is home to some internationally important business clusters such as fashion, music, media and publishing. The quality of the Borough's housing and what it has to offer are important in attracting the international business people that work in those industries. This is crucial for Kensington and Chelsea, London and the UK as a whole.

I should of course point out that this Examination isn't the end of the story. Residents are interested in the details of how we will approach traffic and construction management, and applicants will want to know what information they will need to submit with their basement applications. We can't put this all in the policy, so we will be producing a new supplementary planning document to give guidance on these issues. But first we need to ensure that we have the right policy in place, which is why this Examination is so important to us.

I should just like to conclude by saying that our proposed policy takes a sensible and balanced view. We don't think it is right that basements are stopped, but our experience shows that we do need to manage their scale and impact rather more than is allowed for in the current policy. We commend our proposed policy to you Sir as the right approach.