

## HIGHBARNES RESIDENTS GROUP MEETING

6.15pm, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2010

Gade Room, Civic Centre

### **Present:**

Steve Baker – Assistant Director (Chair)  
Helen Lawrence – Communications Officer  
Jenny Young – Civil Contingencies Co-ordinator (Minutes)  
Mark Skittrall – Hyder Consulting  
Cllr Steven Holmes  
Cllr Geoff Doole  
Dave Bowman – Hertfordshire Highways  
James Doe – Assistant Director  
Lisa Bayley – resident  
Richard & Jennifer Taylor – residents  
Rodney & Michelle Berkeley – residents  
Lisa Bayley –resident  
Tracey Gill – resident  
Carly Simon – resident

### **Welcome and Introductions:**

JY was welcomed back to the group after her maternity leave.

### **Project Update:**

SB provided a brief summary of where we are currently with the project:

- an application for funding had been submitted to the HCA on 18<sup>th</sup> October
- there were two separate applications
- One application was for 50% funding from the HCA and the other for 100% funding via a Derelict Land Clearance Order (DLCO)
- SB was in regular contact with David Keaton at the HCA
- SB had met with Mike Penning (MP) on Monday and explained to him that the application was now with central government and any influence he could exert would be most welcome
- The last letter circulated to residents had proved useful for insurance companies

SB reminded residents that it was their duty as homeowners to report any material change in circumstances to their insurance company.

MB said that she had kept her insurance company fully informed since the beginning and it had been noted on file but had not had any other effect on her policy as yet.

## **Residents' concerns (as raised by R. Taylor, 9<sup>th</sup> November)**

### **One to One Meetings**

RT said that some Nash Mills residents do not seem to know anything about the problems affecting their homes. He felt that one to one discussions with those affected should take place before information is put out into the wider domain.

SB referred to the residents' meeting held in March 2010, in which residents were informed that the Council officers would visit homes where boreholes were to be drilled, but would not be visiting every property in the area.

RT said that it was their understanding that everyone whose home was in the "blue" zone (on the Hyder map) would be visited, as some of these people were still unaware of what was taking place.

TG said that several elderly people don't know whether or not they will be affected. They need to be visited as they are unable to find things out using the internet.

MB said people also need a visit to explain the recent council tax rebates and some people do not understand why they have got it.

RB Only a handful of people know where the mines are, which are those living in within the 50 metre radius of the junction where the initial investigation took place. The Hyder report shows that other areas are affected, but people do not realise this.

TG requested another public meeting is held to explain the Hyder report to residents

LB said that the letter received about the Council Tax rebate does not say why they have got it or how the decision was made. Asked if it meant that those who had received the rebate would be more seriously affected.

TG agreed that an accompanying letter giving more details would have been appreciated

SB had received one enquiry from a resident asking him to explain the decision, which he had passed on to the Valuation Officer to respond to. He felt that a public meeting should be related to project outcomes. As we do not yet know the outcome of the funding application, we cannot explain to residents what will be happening next.

TG felt that a lot had happened, for example the publication of the Hyder report and the Council Tax band changes

LB asked if the Valuations Office could send a representative to the public meeting to explain their decision

SB asked MS if he felt there was a practical way of presenting the information in the report to the public.

MS said that the geophysical report and the structural reports contained all the knowledge we have to date. He felt that the website was the best way to disseminate this sort of information. It would be difficult to present sections of it in isolation as people would be drawing their own conclusions.

RT said that residents are looking at the map and seeing a patch of blue under their house and jumping to their own conclusions anyway. He is not asking for one to one meetings with everyone, just the handful who we anticipate will be directly affected. Perhaps just for those who will require boreholes to be drilled on their properties.

RB thought that that sort of information would have been in the application made to the HCA. The progression of the application is a major milestone to report. People will have had the information in the newsletter but had no opportunity to ask questions. It is only fair to hold a public meeting and give likely timescales etc. There is nothing better than personal contact.

SB suggested that rather than holding a full public meeting at this stage, it might be better to have one just for those that need the information the most.

JD suggested that a “drop in” or “surgery” style event could be held at the civic centre.

TG mentioned that there was a certain amount of scaremongering. Some people thought they were directly affected when they weren't at all

SB asked if a meeting could be held for those living in the “inner zone” (as per the PBA map).

HL thought that this was around 70 households

MS said we could narrow that figure down further to just include those most affected

GD said all that stands out to him on the reports are words such as “severe risk” and “high risk”. With the road being closed as well it makes people afraid that their homes could fall into a hole with no warning.

LB said that although the Council may not be directly responsible for homeowners, they are responsible for Council tenants and it was the Council's duty to ensure they were safe.

GD would like to see a public meeting held with a practical interpretation of the report for those most at risk

JD said the regular newsletter made the information accessible to everyone. We have no solution yet without the funding. We could try to explain the findings but can't solve the problem.

GD felt that there was some confusion on the risk register, between project risk and personal risk. The words “high risk” could be in relation to an aspect of the funding application, rather than the safety of people's homes, but it was not always clear which was which. People are wondering if they are safe.

MS said that the only intrusive investigations so far had been around the junction, the rest of the interpretations so far were only based on geo-physical data.

MB asked MS about his experiences at Briar's Lane, Hatfield

MS said that there were some meetings held at the local school. The only one to ones were held just before the intrusive work began, in order to gain consent for surveys etc. The other meetings were held at roughly six month intervals, sometimes more sometimes less, depending on the milestones achieved. In between meetings, information was conveyed via newsletters and letter drops.

TG asked MS if he knew yet which homes would need intrusive work carried out.

MS said he only had a general plan, not a list of specific homes yet. They would only do this once the funding had been received.

LB said that people need to know if there is a problem under their homes

MS said he only had an interpretative mine layout. The extent of the mine beyond what PBA did is based on geo-physical data only. The design phase of the investigation would give a lot more

information, for example the depth and condition of the mines. We have so far only extrapolated from existing data.

RB suggested that we cover this sort of thing at the public meeting, not now

SB asked whether one large meeting or a series of smaller surgeries would be the most effective way of doing it

CS asked when we would know if the funding application had been successful

SB believed it would be around March 2011. The application is being processed and would be presented to the board at HCA before Christmas. We will then be given an idea if the application will be approved, but not the amount awarded. The DLCO would be dealt with separately by the CLG.

MS said that for Briar's Lane it was approximately 9 months between the application being approved and the funding being received

SB said that at least half a dozen applications were currently going for a DLCO. CLG could approve them but then they needed to be signed off by the Treasury. It was a two stage process, which was why Mike Penning was involved to apply pressure..

SB asked if all were in agreement that we would run a session for those most likely to be affected, followed by a larger public meeting once the outcome of the application was known. All agreed.

### **Publicising of Information**

SB said that there was no reason not to disclose the information that had been published on the website

RT said that it has just appeared straight into the public domain. The residents would prefer it if a letter were sent beforehand, or a visit, before this sort of information goes onto the internet

SB said that an FOI request led to the publication of the report on the website. There were 450 properties in the whole zone and permission could not be sought from all of them.

LB said that at least the residents' group should have been spoken to first. If the information affects specific households then these people should have been told first. We knew the report was around, but have not seen it, which is why an FOI request was put in.

### **Council Tax**

LB asked SB if the council was going to ask the Valuations Office what they had based their decision on.

SB said that he couldn't see what the rationale was for excluding some houses and would try to find out.

### **Insurance**

It was agreed that this area had already been covered in the discussion.

### **Risks**

SB said that Peter Farrier was doing monthly walk-rounds in the area. John Keaton (our principal structural engineer) also did his own separate walk-rounds.

TG said that she often saw strange people wandering round the area and would prefer it if official people wore hi-vis jackets

MB added that some criminals wore hi-vis to try to pass for workers, so this would not necessarily help!

RT said that surveys used to be carried out every 4-6 weeks, then they stopped for a while and had appeared to start again recently. Asked if anyone was actually looking down into the ground to monitor what was happening, ie, in relation to the missing water issue.

CS said that the water company had been looking around.

MB said that when she has spoken to Veolia workers they never seem to be aware of the problems in the area

DB said that there was currently nowhere on their systems that would automatically flag up the chalk mines issue when jobs were booked. He said that by categorising some roads as having “special engineering difficulties” this should then flag up on the system. Utility companies notify Herts Highways when they are going to be working in the area but HH do not have the power to stop them.

LB asked if the Council could speak to someone more senior at Veolia to discuss the problems with the water. There are serious concerns locally that water could be seeping into the mines and weakening them.

MS said that he would have a conversation with Veolia

HL pointed out that for sewerage related problems, ie, toilets backing up, the company to speak to was Thames Water.

### **Milestones**

SB asked if a flow chart showing the processes we were going through and the next steps would be useful to residents.

RT said that it would be helpful

SB said that one would be drawn up and added to the website

### **Impact on residents when work commences**

MS said the intention was to keep to a minimum those who would have to relocate and the length of the relocation. It was anticipated that some residents would be out of their homes for 1 to 2 weeks. Project funding would not cover relocation. Some insurance policies will cover this cost.

SB said that Council tenants would of course be provided with temporary accommodation whilst the work was taking place. The Council would have to consider whether it could offer any assistance with relocation to non-Council tenants.

MS said he could not say exactly how long the works would take. There would be a condition survey before and after the work. Sensors would be put in place, connected to an automatic alert if there were any concerning readings. Most work should be able to take place with residents in situ, though if anything major was discovered during the works, then people may need to be evacuated whilst work was taking place.

MB asked if houses would need to be emptied before work began

MS said that residents could leave their property as if they were going on holiday

TG asked if properties were adjoining would both houses need to be evacuated

MS said that it depends on the contractors and how many boreholes they will be digging each day. Disturbance would be kept to a minimum.

### **Plan "B"**

Whatever the outcome of the funding application, a report will have to be made to Council. If we do get the funding then we will procure the necessary works. We would need to apprise members of the options and ask them how they wish to proceed. As we don't know what decision they would make, we can't yet say what will happen.

RB asked if it would be a "showstopper" if we were not awarded funding

JD said that we could not advise either way

CS asked MS if a proposal had ever been rejected at this stage

MS said that it had not happened with any Hyder projects

SB reminded residents that there was no guarantee of receiving the funding. We may only get 50% and would have to consider if there was any way of making up the shortfall. If the difference was too great then we may have to see what we could do with the money available. The Council has no legal obligation to pay for the works and it would be expected to go for the external funding that is available. Only if the application is unsuccessful could the Council consider using its own capital resources.

LB asked if we could keep chasing the HCA to push through our application

SB said he was in regular contact with the HCA and would keep the pressure on them. The MP could exert pressure on CLG with regards to the DLCO. If we do not get funding it will not be for want of trying!

### **Mineral Ownership**

This area of research drew a blank. No mine owner was discovered. We have satisfied the HCA that we have done enough in this respect.

### **Contact with Other Residents' Groups**

RT asked if the residents could be supplied with contact details for any residents groups linked with the Hatfield or Reading mines. JY said she would find the details and pass them on.

### **Utilities**

It was agreed that this area had already been covered during the discussion.

### **Being Kept Informed**

LB asked if the residents' group could have a monthly email letting them know what is happening behind the scenes. It would help them with keeping other residents informed who sometimes approach them with questions.

JY agreed to ensure this happens and offered to re-circulate her contact details so that residents could approach her direct with any questions or issues.

### **Documentation**

SB offered to email out a copy of the funding application to the residents' group

### **Membership of Group**

SB said he was happy to extend the membership of the residents' group if that was what people wanted

LB said she felt the residents sitting on the residents' group should establish an information flow themselves to ensure that everyone is covered

TG thought that once we knew which households would be involved, we could then invite them to attend the group

LB asked if they would be told which residents would be invited to the proposed drop-in sessions for affected residents

TG added that some people would prefer their involvement to remain private and not necessarily shared with members of the residents group

SB said that we would inform them when we had sent the letters out but didn't need to name the individuals they had gone to.

CS said that some people would be quite cross if other residents knew about problems with their house before they did

### **Public Meeting**

Agreed that the main public meeting would be deferred until the New Year when we would have more to report

RB asked if ground monitoring equipment could be installed to provide reassurance to residents whilst the lengthy funding application was going on

SB said he would discuss this with MS

RT asked if the up to date list of residents group contacts could be emailed to the group, as the current group contained internal DBC addresses that do not work externally.

JY offered to do this

CS and TG gave JY and HL their new email addresses for inclusion on the list.

RB felt that some reassurance was needed about the risk assessment. People with young families are particularly worried. The PBA report suggested that attention was needed by 2012 and that is fast approaching.

The issue of the missing water was causing particular concern as we know that water leaks can accelerate the deterioration of the mines.

JY offered to speak to Thames Water about the sewerage concerns and see if they could come and carry out an inspection

The meeting ended at 8.15pm