

ANALYSIS & COMMENT

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A DOG'S CHANCE

Walthamstow's famous greyhound track has been mothballed for three years while housing association L&Q wrestles with local opposition to its plans to build 300 homes on the site. After a crunch meeting last week the two sides seem as far apart as ever. Is this a foretaste of the new localism? **Iain Withers** reports

It was once one of the classiest nightspots in east London. Walthamstow Stadium was where the great and good jostled with cloth-capped workers for a table to watch the dogs. Its bulb-lit facade could be seen for miles around on race nights. Now the mothballed greyhound track is back centre stage in the mother of all development disputes.

Housing association London & Quadrant bought the site for £18m three years ago with the intention of building 490 homes on it. Little did they know the difficulties they had let themselves in for. First of all the market tanked, cutting the value of the land by half. L&Q shelved the scheme until last year, when it unveiled its Conran & Partners-designed redevelopment plans for the track to a storm of criticism.

Opponents appeared on all sides to criticise L&Q for trashing Walthamstow's local heritage. The dispute has attracted everything from a campaign group backed by greyhound enthusiasts, contentious interventions from London mayor Boris Johnson and local MP and cabinet minister Iain Duncan Smith, to allegations of threatening and intimidating behaviour.

The stakes are certainly high. The Save our Stow campaign group claims that a return to greyhound racing would bring 500 much needed jobs to a sorely deprived area. They are backing local businessman and champion greyhound owner Bob Morton, who has offered to buy the site

and refurbish the track.

But in a crunch meeting last week, the housing association refused to back down. It argues that a residential development is essential to tackle the borough's crippling housing shortage. In an era of localism, the dispute acts as a cautionary tale for any client seeking to develop in the teeth of local opposition.

The dispute came to a head at the end of last year. In December, after an allegedly fiery meeting, L&Q cancelled two consultation events, accusing campaigners of sending threatening messages to its staff and subjecting them to aggressive behaviour. Campaigners, for their part, claim it was

TRACK RECORD: 75 YEARS OF GREYHOUND RACING

Walthamstow Stadium was the vibrant hub of the community for 75 years before its closure in 2008. Ward councillor Nick Buckmaster, whose family has lived in the area for four generations, says the bars would buzz with talk of the races. "At around 6.30 on a race night people would walk or drive here and it would be all lit up and exciting. It has always been part of the local fabric and it's sadly missed."

Businessman and champion greyhound owner Bob Morton, who wants to buy and refurbish the stadium, remembers the venue as a glitzy night out. "You couldn't get in the Paddock Grill restaurant, it was always fully booked. You'd go in and get yourself a bottle of Dom Pérignon. It dealt with everybody from all walks of life. It was tremendous."

actually the prospect of cabinet minister and local MP Iain Duncan Smith turning up with a BBC TV crew which made L&Q cancel – an allegation the landlord denies.

Mike Johnson, land director for L&Q, says his staff were subjected to the worst intimidation he'd seen in 20 years. He claims overbearing behaviour by Save our Stow campaigners soured the December meeting. "We saw members of the public come in and they were drowned out. There were a lot of people talking over people and getting shouted down. I've been developing projects like this for 20 years and I've never had to cancel one in all that time. It's regrettable but it wasn't attended by people who wanted to discuss."

This claim is strongly denied by the campaigners and politicians who attended the meeting. Walking around the stadium with Waltham Forest councillor Nick Buckmaster, he maintains that the atmosphere was subdued by the time he got to the meeting and he had no feeling anything untoward had happened. "By the time I got there, it was a very hush town hall. [The intimidation] just didn't happen at all. But the next thing I knew on the Friday it was 'right, we won't be doing any more consultations because staff have been intimidated'." Ricky Holloway, leader of the Save our Stow campaign also said he was "shocked and surprised" by the allegations.

L&Q was forced to apologise to the MPs after it issued a statement which seemed to imply that the politicians had been involved in an intimidating campaign, a suggestion Duncan Smith branded "outrageous".

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MIKE JOHNSON, L&Q

It was in this atmosphere of mistrust that L&Q sat down with Duncan Smith, Labour MP Stella Creasy and Bob Morton to thrash out a compromise for the site at a meeting at Waltham Forest council last Friday. Despite L&Q amending the number of houses planned, no common ground was found. Duncan Smith said the meeting was dominated by L&Q, with Morton struggling to get his proposals considered. "L&Q were very defensive throughout," he said.

One question that many are asking now is whether, with the impact of localism, this kind of dispute is set to grow or diminish. As regional housing targets are abolished, other councils in Waltham Forest's position could be tempted to scrap housing schemes in the face of concerted local pressure.

Roger Humber, strategic policy adviser to the House Builders Association, believes the government is plain wrong to suggest the localism proposals will increase housing development. "The government has created a myth that local people get development thrust upon them and they'd want more if they were involved. I suggest that people who suggest that don't get out very much."

Steve Turner of the Home Builders Federation thinks the government has a challenge on its hands to make sure schemes are not hijacked by vocal opposition groups. "Unfortunately it has become the norm for schemes to always attract a lot of opposition. We need more people to get involved who are interested in developing their communities."

In the meantime, L&Q intends to submit a planning application in March and is confident most of the local community will come out in favour of the scheme. "We will certainly keep talking to our opponents but we just have a fundamental disagreement on the future of the site," Johnson says.

But that future is not something any sensible person would bet on right now.



Local businessman Bob Morton's vision for a refurbished dog track

TWO SIDES OF THE STORY

L&Q says its £50m scheme will bring 200 site jobs and 50-60 jobs in the commercial and leisure facilities once completed. Mike Johnson, land director, says the scheme is part of L&Q's £140m investment in the borough, which he says is badly short of houses. According to a recent Deloitte report, of 8,000 homes being built in east London, only 240 homes are being constructed in Waltham Forest. The London plan requires the borough to build 760 homes a year over the next decade.

L&Q rejects the claim that local residents are all in favour of the dog track. Johnson says the housing association has visited over 700 homes in the streets around the site and has found residents to be broadly in favour of their proposals. L&Q has responded to feedback by scaling back its residential proposals from 490 to 300 homes and introduced a community leisure centre and public square to its plans. The grade II-listed stadium facade will be retained.

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buildings to a meaningful use and enable access to them for more than just a special interest minority," Johnson says.

But speaking after the meeting on Friday,

Iain Duncan Smith said he remained "constantly disappointed" by L&Q's approach. "L&Q are not behaving like reasonable people, that's my concern. Reasonable people sit down and negotiate and discuss."

Local greyhound owner Bob Morton, whose £8m-9m offer for the site was

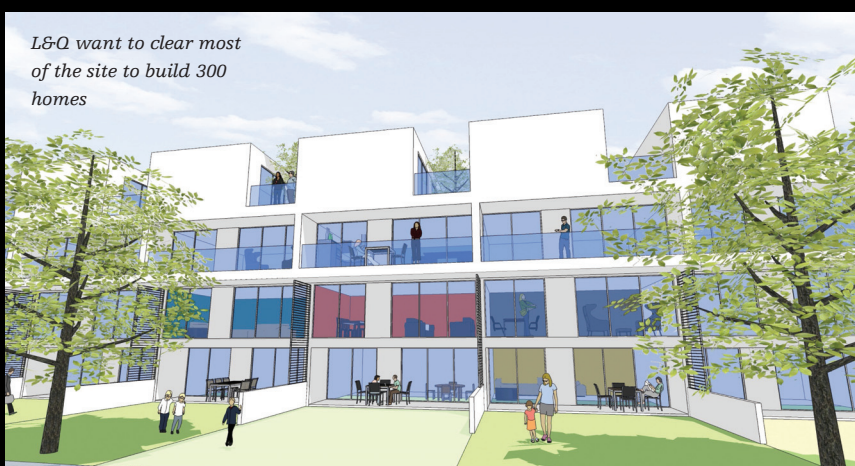
L&Q ARE NOT BEHAVING LIKE REASONABLE PEOPLE. REASONABLE PEOPLE SIT DOWN AND DISCUSS

rejected last year, says the door remains open for L&Q to strike a deal. But Duncan Smith says it's clear L&Q won't do a deal because it overpaid for the site. "That's the bottom line, they're caught and they need to build houses."

English Heritage also urged the council to reject L&Q's plans this week. The body, which promotes and protects historic monuments and landmarks, said the proposals would have a negative impact on listed aspects of the site. In a letter to Waltham Forest council's planning department, English Heritage advises that the best use for such a building is usually what it was designed for.

Meanwhile, London mayor Boris Johnson has also made his position clear. In a statement in December, he said: "I urge ... the owners of the remaining stadiums to preserve those in active use for dog racing for the benefit of Londoners."

The London mayor is likely to make the final planning decision over L&Q's eventual application.



L&Q want to clear most of the site to build 300 homes