

737 words

## Looking at Highgate with fresh eyes

By Maggy Meade-King

As I write this on a sunny Autumnal morning, more than thirty Highgate Neighbourhood Forum volunteers are fanning out across Highgate – armed with clipboards and cameras - to look with fresh eyes at parts of the area they are unfamiliar with. It all began on a September evening in the Waterlow Park Centre (courtesy of the Friends of Waterlow Park and Camden Council) when the inventor of “Placecheck” – urban design trainer Rob Cowan - explained his idea to a group of keen volunteers. He told us that many communities around the UK had found this a useful way to learn about their neighbourhood and come up with ideas of how to make it better.

David Porter, who organised the Placecheck sessions, had divided the Forum area into manageable chunks which could be walked in a couple of hours and which crossed expected ‘boundaries’ like main roads and broke up clusters of streets, so that we could experience our area in a different way. We were told to ask:

- What do we like about this place?
- What do we dislike about it?
- What do we need to work on?

We should look round the backs of parades of shops and find what was in the alleys behind. We should look up at the architecture, down at the state of the pavement and at the street furniture and talk to anyone we met who was willing to talk to us. We should notice what was happening on the streets and be generally nosy! As we walked, we should ask ourselves why the place is as it is and discuss who should be involved to make our ideas for improvement happen.

By the time you read this, we shall have come back together to share our experiences and our photos, but there will be further opportunities to share with you what we found.

### Asking questions about Highgate’s future

Right now, active members of the Neighbourhood Forum are most focused on finding out what residents – of all ages and interests – and businesses want Highgate to be in the future. We also want to make sure that everyone knows we are here and has an opportunity to get involved to whatever extent they are able. To those ends, we have been busy all summer distributing the Forum questionnaire leaflets to every household in the area. We have gained new recruits as a result, including someone who has set up a Facebook page and a Twitter feed for us. The questionnaire responses are currently being analysed and later in October there will be a big workshop event where the results of both the survey and the Placecheck walkabouts will be presented and then developed to give us the basis of our Neighbourhood Plan.

### **Support from the Prince's Foundation and CABE**

Both this event and the report back from the "walkabouts" are being facilitated for us by the Prince's Foundation for Building Community, who are being funded to work with us and other leading Forums by the Department for Communities and Local Government. They will also be supporting the Neighbourhood Plan working group, led by Elspeth Clements, in drawing up the Plan in detail over the next few months. Elspeth has set up sub-groups covering Business, Culture, Heritage, Open Spaces, Planning, Sustainability and Transport, so do get in touch with her (via Highgate Society post box) if you would like to contribute to any of these.

The Forum also applied to CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), which is now part of the Design Council, for assistance under their Neighbourhood Planning Support scheme and we have just heard that we have been successful in our application. At this stage, the full details of what they will be offering us are still to be determined but it will essentially be free design support. We feel their assistance should mesh well with that offered by the Prince's Foundation.

### **Designation by Christmas!**

In the meantime, we have submitted our Designation Application to Camden and Haringey Councils and had a joint meeting with them. They are happy with our approach and you will probably see newspaper adverts, emails and posters about our application over the next few weeks. We hope to be formally designated by Christmas.

Do get in touch via [admin@highgateneighbourhoodforum.org.uk](mailto:admin@highgateneighbourhoodforum.org.uk) or by dropping a note into the Highgate Society or HLSI, if you would like to get involved.