

Two public meetings with Margaret Hodge MP in Dagenham

Friday 4th March 2011 at 5pm – St Thomas's Church Becontree.

Maybe 60+ people attended, mostly local residents, many elderly and of long standing in the district.

Margaret Hodge breezed in with her excuse (her daughter has just had a baby) that the meeting would be short.

She said "This is a contentious issue and it must not to lead to poor community relations, and we don't want people coming in from outside causing trouble as we have had enough of that".

She asked for the representative from the Community centre to begin by outlining what they have in mind to provide. The man present said he was not intending to speak but the chairman had not yet arrived and could the meeting wait for him?

"No" said Hodge, "we cannot wait – you will have to speak".

He said that they intend a shop front accessible to the public with books and gifts.

Margaret Hodge asked if they have someone to run that?

No, but we expect someone to be interested. Then we will havespace for the neighbourhood watch.

A Policeman, head of Becontree ward team, stood to clarify that this was **not** going to be their base which will remain at Marks Gate as it will not be secure. This is merely going to be a space where they, or anybody could hold meetings if needed.

The Mosque representative continued that they want to have a GP clinic once a month, and a GP from Goodmayes is willing to come.

Margaret Hodge asked whether that was agreed that with the Primary Care Trust but the representative did not know. She said that you can't just set up a clinic just like that, you have to organise it with the health Authority.

Local woman – "Wwe have a perfectly good GP locally, we don't need any monthly clinic"

Mosque Representative said – he can give general advice

Local lady – “. . .and the pharmacist in the parade gives good advice – we don't need your clinic.”

Margaret Hodge – “This idea won't work, its pie in the sky. Carry on.”

Mosque Rep continued . . .”and IT facilities, PC training . . .”

There was then the following interchange between Margaret Hodge and one particular woman.

Margaret Hodge said “If you find it so offensive to be in the room with me please leave. You are being offensive. Please look at me! I am Margaret Hodge. I am your MP! Be civil or leave.”

The woman said she was looking away so as to be able to contain her temper as she was becoming angry.

Margaret Hodge – “I won't have people being offensive.”

The Mosque Representative carried on trying to explain about the IT facilities the Community centre would be offering.

Local resident –”Where are you going to get the funding – all these courses are being cut? And who will it be open to? Young? Elderly? Both?”

Mosque Representative” . . . er, we were thinking mainly of people who have English as a second language.”

Local women – “Let's get this straight. It is going to be a mosque? Everybody keeps calling it a 'community centre' but it sounds like a mosque. You keep changing your name but Mosque keeps coming up on your website. You look up these 'community centres' on the internet and they turn out to be mosques. Are you just calling it a community centre to get us in here?”

Margaret Hodge “It will be a community centre *and* a mosque. It will have space for worship and prayer.”

Elderly woman – “Green Lane used to have such beautiful shops – now I only use the co-op and the bakers for my English food.”

Can't we deal with the shopping issues? But there was no planning official present

A local man spoke. He said there were too many falsehoods told to the planning committee. To

do with the plans containing a morgue put in at a later date and the effect on those businesses other than the butcher. He pondered why do 1300 objections from local people do not outweigh a facility for 80 men and said he feared a cover up.

Margaret Hodge said "The decision is made. There will be a community centre and mosque with maximum capacity of 80 people."

Another resident spoke. In his opinion there was no openness. In a 7 page document Muslim and Islam was only mentioned once, on page 3. There was not enough publicity to local residents – the project was introduced in a clandestine way.

Margaret Hodge said "We have a decision, this is where we are" She suggested that perhaps members of the Residents Association could join the Mosque Committee.

The Vicar spoke. He said, "The existing Mosque has never operated publicly until today. This is terrible. Our Christian churches (he gestured to the RC priest, the RC church is opposite) are open. You know who we are, what we do. Local residents have not been told the truth. This is very wounding."

Margaret Hodge repeated. "We are where we are (this was to be her refrain for the rest of the meeting). How do we go forward? They have valid planning permission".

Vicar "But what about community cohesion?"

Margaret Hodge "I was not involved in the planning process."

Vicar – "Neither was I!!!"

The demonstration anticipated the following day was mentioned. Someone said it's going to be hell tomorrow.

The local woman who had been told to show her MP due respect said, "Only if people let it get that way. The last one was OK, except for the lies, saying people were intimidated. No one was intimidated!"

Margaret Hodge ordered her to leave.

The woman did so, reminding the rest of the room that Margaret Hodge does not live in their constituency.

An elderly lady asked – If we need a community centre so much why hasn't the council done

something already. There is so little for young people to do in Barking and Dagenham unless they play an organised sport.

A Muslim woman in hijab spoke. "I do not understand the claim that has been made.- How will having a Mosque damage business, surely attendance at the mosque will support general business?"

Local resident "it will support the wrong type of business. They will visit all these takeaways, all this halal. We don't want them – we want proper shops, a proper greengrocer, a proper butcher, children's clothes."

Two young Muslim men had arrived. One with some small children, the other in ankle length grey robe and hat. The robed man in grey spoke. "I am from the Becontree Heath Islamic Society. It is not our intention to take anything away from the community."

He was challenged, many voices speaking at once.

Margaret Hodge said "I get the anger. But we *will* get this project – can we make it work?"

The Vicar addressed Margaret Hodge directly and seriously. To précis what he said –

The trust of the community is broken. We have been misled, kept in the dark, this is very wrong. Local people have been marginalised.

It was his church – she couldn't ask him to leave.

Another local resident complained that there are too many halal food outlets. The only English food shops are the co-op and Greggs bakers.

Margaret Hodge said "There is nothing I can do."

Local resident "But you are our MP!"

Margaret Hodge said "We need to start winding up this meeting – I do have to go". The Mosque trustees must come back to the people here today; you have the list of attendees.

A local resident asked the young man in grey – Why did you choose this location?

He answered "Because it was very central, and within walking distance of our members."

She replied – you could have had a vacant site on the industrial estate, or the old B&Q site, which is on the bus route.

He was horrified! An industrial estate! He said "Do you think we want our women, wives and mothers and children going on an industrial estate?"

Many voices challenged him and he sat down. Many of the women in that meeting will have worked themselves on that industrial estate which still contains, among other works, the main depot of Dairy Crest.

An official of the Traffic department was introduced. It was emphasised that he is nothing to do with planning but here to help with existing traffic problems, as the Pentecostal church in the former bingo hall attracts a lot of traffic already, and any future problems when the mosque opens. He outlined the different things the council can do, resident permits, Controlled Parking Zone (CPZ) etc.

The Roman Catholic Priest spoke about the need to have adequate parking and safe access for funerals. It's all very easy telling people to walk to church but a funeral is different, it needs vehicles.

The Vicar spoke again – Our churches are here to serve the community and we do so without causing problems – all we ask is for parking to be available to us for Sunday morning services and funerals. If the only answer the council has to this whole matter is parking restrictions which will cause us more difficulties with even that aspect of our service to the community then "Shame on you!"

Margaret Hodge announced that in three weeks they should meet again. In that time the Mosque officials are to put on paper exactly what it is they are going to do with the site so that everybody will know. Meanwhile she will investigate with the council what they can offer in respect of a rent free period for the start-up of a community shop, or other useful retail business. And tell the council they must do better re planning next time.

Three weeks later. Friday 25th March.

St Thomas's church also held the second meeting, again scheduled for 5pm. The hall was laid out for the meeting with rows of chairs facing the front. There was a table to one side where people were examining the architects proposed plans.

The hall filled up rapidly. At 5.20pm Margaret Hodge strode into the hall. She said "This will be a brief meeting, we have a little under an hour"

She didn't like the arrangement of the chairs and insisted that the chairs were moved into a

circle around the hall. She then had space in the middle to be seen and where she could strut about clapping her hands and calling for silence at intervals.

Mrs Hodge began by saying that this week an official of the planning department was in attendance, plus representatives from the "centre" to tell of their plans and some councillors – Dominic, Darren, Jim, Graham and some others.

The mosque representatives this time were two different young men, bearded, bespectacled, long Islamic dress with hats. The same woman in the hijab was there again.

Margaret Hodge said "Where had we got last time? I got the anger about this mosque and community centre but they have valid planning permission and once that decision has been taken, it is taken. Now a joint committee would be good. And there is an issue around parking which the churches feel strongly about as it will limit access to the churches.'

There was dissent from the audience to her assertion that the decision could not be challenged.

Margaret Hodge said "Even if people are cross can we work together to make the Mosque and community centre work for the good of the area. Let's start with the structure; have we any plans available?"

A local resident put a question to her. "You say we must make this Mosque work. But we don't want it. There was an internal memo by the planning department – it was unsuitable for the area."

Margaret Hodge replied "There is no challenge to this legal decision. This could be good for the community. "

She made the planning officer stand and speak. He said that planning permission has been granted for a place of worship. After that, in planning terms they are not really interested in what goes on in there.

There was then what our source described as uproar from the audience. He was challenged about what could be done. He said that the only way is a Judicial review and the council does not recommend that.

Margaret Hodge then asked one of the young men from the mosque to speak to the meeting about their plans. He did not get a favourable reception and Mrs Hodge had to clap her hands quite a lot while calling for silence.

He began, "This country has given us the opportunity to practice our religion. We have mosques everywhere, we started in Tower Hamlets but there is only one mosque so far in Barking and this will be the first in Dagenham. The Muslim population is growing and there will be more mosques".

A group of men challenged him about the undesirability of Muslim extremists. Another man whose son is gay said he did not want his son walking the streets of Dagenham in fear like gays do in Tower Hamlets because of Islamic intolerance of gays

The Muslim man said everybody will be welcome in the mosque so long as local people respect their ways.

Margaret Hodge asked him "What are you guys going to provide?"

He said, "It's all in our plans." At this time the plans were being passed round the room. Some attendees said these had changed from the plans first shown to local people.

Margaret Hodge started to tell the meeting what she thought the Mosque and community centre was going to provide. She was shouted down – let him speak, we want to hear it from him, not what you think.

A policeman called for order, one at a time please or we shall be here all night.

Margaret Hodge told the meeting "There will be a shop, a hall open to everybody, advice facilities, for debt and housing, and educational facilities." At that there was again vociferous objection.

Hodge called, "Quiet, quiet, I will not tolerate this aggression".

Darren the councillor was asked to speak. He berated the meeting for intolerance, said he was very concerned by what he was hearing around him. Dagenham has some of the worst problems in London yet this effort to provide a place where advice on debt and suchlike could be given is not appreciated. He was also challenged and told that opposition to the mosque would not go away.

There is a belief among local residents that as well as imposing the mosque for ideological purposes to undermine the indigenous community in favour of multiculturalism, the council have seized their chance to introduce parking zones and restrictions as a way of raising revenue, via permits and fines. The proposed CPZ will extend much further than the area that might reasonably be affected by traffic attending the mosque.

Hodge announced that some people, who she did not recognise from the previous meeting, had come solely to cause trouble. A woman shouted that this is disgusting behaviour. Margaret Hodge said she agreed – the objectors to the mosque were disgusting.

A large number of people then walked out. As they left some reminded Hodge that she does not live in her constituency and that she has a more comfortable lifestyle than her constituents.

The woman in the hijab said that she is very hurt that their plans for the community are not welcomed. "I want you to see that Islam is not so bad. I am English, I cover both cultures. The Islam I know is peaceful. I have nothing to do with those poppy burners. I want a cricket club here so that my son can play with yours. Don't you want a cookery club where you can learn to cook lovely samosas and roast chicken?"

That patronising attitude did not go down well. Her chin wobbled with her hurt victim status.

An elderly lady began to talk to her sternly about the segregation in the Islamic school further down Green Lane just into Redbridge. Why are little girls put in this hijab so young and why are there no churches in so many Muslim countries?

Margaret Hodge decided then that she had had enough. She said that she will not deal with bigots, or allow bigotry at any meeting she holds.

Meanwhile the two Muslim men were openly laughing, leaning back in their chairs. They seemed very confident.

She said that a list would go round for anybody to sign up for a small working party to deal with the specific issue of parking and who were interested in making a community centre in the mosque work. She specifically invited the Muslim postmistress.

She would do no more in the heat of the moment. The meeting then broke up. This was round 5.50pm. A brief meeting indeed.

Comments heard as local residents left included.

An elderly lady aged nearly 80 who still lives in the house where she was born, which had been her parents before her, said "Had I known how this area was going to change for the worse I would have taken the opportunity to move several years ago, but it's too late for me now."

Outside someone else remarked on how rude Margaret Hodge is. She may have the title 'Lady' from her late husband, but she is not a lady. Her behaviour was considered rude and common.