

# **The North Finchley Masterplan: Betting with high stakes**

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Barnet Council will soon decide whether to approve a massive development in North Finchley that could destroy much of the town centre as we know it. Many of the buildings around Tally Ho will be demolished and replaced with tall blocks of flats. While a new, bright, bustling and appealing town centre core is promised, it is equally likely to be dark, windy, desolate and bland. The council shouldn't gamble on this unsuitable high-stakes scheme.

## **The proposals**

Our area, which has seen no major development in decades, is suddenly confronting three large planning applications by the developer Regal London.

- 1. North Finchley Town Centre Masterplan (855 homes):** Demolishing most of the area around the Tally Ho triangle, constructing blocks of flats from 6 to 21 storeys and new shops.
- 2. Lodge Lane car park (98 homes):** New blocks of flats, a small cinema and bowling centre. The number of car parking spaces is reduced from 222 to 80.
- 3. Great North Leisure Park (1,502 homes):** Demolishing all buildings and replacing them with an extremely dense development of very tall blocks of flats. Building a new Leisure Centre (Lido) on an adjacent site. The Vue Cinema and Hollywood Bowl will close.

What's happening here is also happening throughout London's suburbs and it will spoil the city forever. Barnet Council has a choice about North Finchley: it can show all of London how development should be done, or it can risk spectacular failures that show what should be avoided.

## **The "vision" for North Finchley**

The current town centre is a busy, crowded and somewhat disorderly place. It is rather shabby, but it's got historical character, life and a lot of potential. The Masterplan's vision places no value on this. It views it as a "brownfield" site ready for demolition and construction.

Under the Masterplan, the existing buildings, including two locally-listed ones, will be demolished and replaced with homes and higher-cost shopping units. There will be no car parking (except for a few disabled spaces). Everyone will walk, ride by public transport or cycle. There will be parking spaces for 1,479 cycles in the new buildings.

The development will take place in phases across four plots. The complete development could take up to 10 years of major demolition, construction and roadworks, with disruptions to traffic and the environment.

Two thirds of the built area will be 8 or more storeys high. A “landmark” building will be 21 storeys and another 15. The present buildings are 2 to 5 storeys.

Four buildings around Tally Ho will not be demolished: the artsdepot and its attached 16-storey Kingsway block, the Tally Ho pub and the United Services Club. The central triangle will include a small public square. That part of Ballards Lane will be closed to cars but a bus lane will run along it next to a cycle lane. The High Road will become two-way along Tally Ho. Nether Street will be blocked off.

### **The 'consultation': an unhappy story**

In February 2018, Barnet Council published a Strategy for regenerating North Finchley town centre. It laid out a bold and clear vision. Many buildings would be replaced with higher quality ones. A few would be tall, up to 12 storeys, but the great majority would be 3 to 6 storeys. Many older buildings would be retained to preserve the area's heritage. It was a plan for renewing the town centre while retaining its human scale and existing character.

Instead of taking the lead to implement its strategy, the council formed a partnership with Regal London to propel the plan. A medium-sized developer, successful and rapidly growing, Regal specializes in building tall developments of flats, student housing and offices, but has no experience of regenerating town centres.

In March 2023, Regal bought the lease to the Great North Leisure Park. Without consulting anyone, the council gave the new owner permission to do away with the Hollywood Bowl bowling alley and the Vue multiplex. These are the only such venues in this part of London and attract people from a wide area. As supposed replacements, the council asked Regal to include a small cinema and bowling unit at Lodge Lane. It has never explained its decision to place two under-sized leisure venues in a location hidden from the High Road. It could have required Regal to include them in the Masterplan next to the artsdepot at Tally Ho, as proposed in its original Strategy.



**How Tally Ho pub will be dwarfed**

A developer is supposed to consult thoroughly with a community about its scheme before making a planning application. Regal did not do this. The community saw no digitized images of what the scheme would look like, no local views and little information on the scale of the buildings. During 2022 and 2023, Regal consulted on detailed designs with council planners, but neglected to give the public any idea of what it was working on. It ignored suggestions to use an empty shop on the High Road to showcase its plans.

The only real attempts at consultation about the proposals were 3-day exhibitions in March and July 2024. The invitations sent to the community gave no indication that what was at stake was the wholesale redevelopment of the town centre.

Regal greatly muddled the waters at its two exhibitions by combining consultations on the Masterplan with those on the Lodge Lane site. These are two separate and very different schemes. The importance of the Masterplan, by far the larger, was lost. No information was provided about the height of the buildings until July 2024.

In November 2024, Regal invited people to view “development proposals for North Finchley High Street [sic]”. This was not a consultation but a one-day exhibition of the final scheme and once more no details of scale or digital images were presented.

After a month on the council’s website, the number of comments on the Masterplan is far lower than seen for other major town centre schemes in London. This is hardly surprising given how poorly information has been provided to the community.

### **What’s good about the Masterplan?**

Some may think the Masterplan a good idea. They could point out that many of the buildings around Tally Ho are dilapidated and no longer fit for purpose. Not all people value an area’s character or history, preferring brand new buildings of a style seen the world over. Some may like much taller buildings while others may believe that, while unattractive, they are needed to provide more homes.

People with above average incomes may favour a smarter and more affluent town centre and believe it could attract visitors from a wider area. Those on lower incomes will have full access to the public areas and will still have cheaper shops and low-cost dining around the fringes of the town centre or in other locations.

### **What’s bad about the Masterplan?**

1. The character of the town centre will be destroyed. It’s taken two centuries of rough and tumble to create the North Finchley we know. Most people value character, which is why an area like Covent Garden was saved from the wrecking ball. North Finchley is not Covent Garden. It’s not a Georgian aristocrat but a gang of feisty, quarrelling,

characters who've been arriving here since the early-19<sup>th</sup> century. It is very much a London town centre. The Masterplan's overwhelming and soulless buildings could be anywhere from Los Angeles to Dubai. A historic town centre like this can be greatly improved without erasing its character.

2. The Masterplan will demolish attractive heritage buildings. It proposes destroying the classic brick and white plaster terrace of the Sea Rock restaurant, on the corner of the High Road and Woodhouse Road. This has marked the southern gateway to the town centre for more than a century. The council lists the Sea Rock building as an important heritage asset and its Strategy called for the whole terrace to be preserved.
3. All offices will be eliminated, contrary to the council's Strategy and Local Plan. A prosperous borough needs office space. Hundreds of people work in the office buildings, and they contribute greatly to the town centre. At lunchtime they go out to eat and shop, and they stay after work to enjoy themselves. Many may live locally. The Masterplan's massive blocks of flats cannot form the core of a proper town centre. They'll become a residential estate with a few bits added on.
4. A town centre is for everyone; the Masterplan is not. The new town centre would exclude those on lower incomes from fully participating in the redevelopment. They will not be able to afford the new homes. The smart new shops and restaurants will not cater to them. This is a kind of instant mass-gentrification. A more gentle and gradual transformation, as allowed for in the North Finchley Strategy, would preserve the area's diversity and include those on lower incomes.
5. Almost all of the homes will be 1 and 2 bedroom flats. Barnet's Plan states that 70% of new homes should have 3 or more bedrooms, but only 10% of the Masterplan's homes have 3 bedrooms and none has more. This is a family-unfriendly development, in which children of over 12 may have no recreation space and younger children must play in little pens on high roofs. A suitable development in the town centre could provide many 3 and 4 bedroom flats, maisonettes and small houses.
6. The Local Plan calls for the town centre to provide 740 more homes in the next 10 years. After allowing for the homes to be demolished, the Masterplan provides about 660 new homes. Lodge Lane promises a further 98. Other schemes will come forward. North Finchley needs to do its part to meet the housing shortage, but it should not be wrecked to over-deliver, especially if the homes are of the wrong kind.
7. London's shortage is not so much of homes, but of affordable homes. The Masterplan falls drastically short on this front. Regal proposes to provide only 20% of the homes as affordable, as compared to Barnet Council's requirement of at least 35%. The cost of a 2-bedroom flat will be £680,000. That's not going to solve London's affordable housing crisis.
8. The Masterplan provides far too little open space, which is what the town centre desperately needs. The small "public square" will be flanked on three sides by very



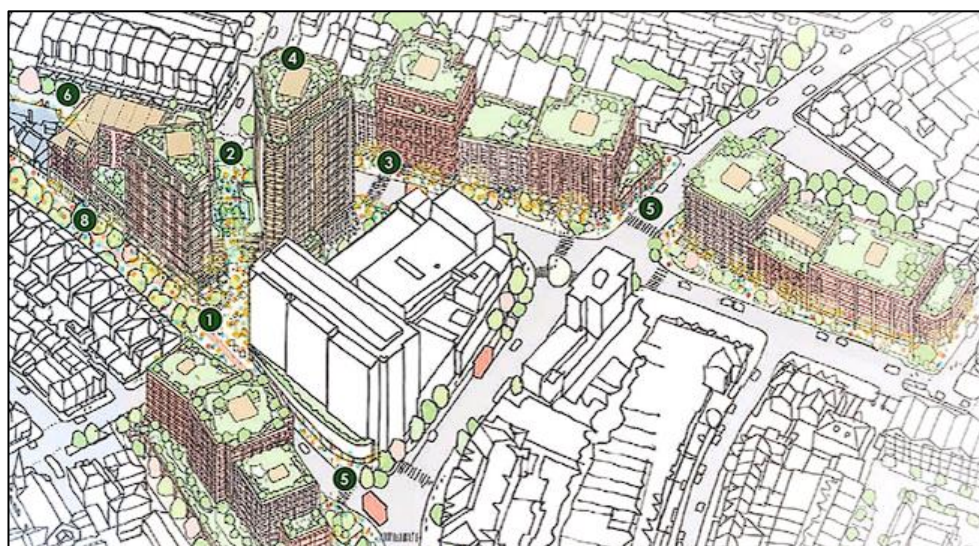
tall buildings and will be in their shadow for most of the time. The space for walking about will be equivalent to three suburban back gardens.

### **A high-risk scheme**

Perhaps the most important reason to reject the Masterplan is that it is very high-risk. Regal says this is a “once in a lifetime” opportunity; one does not take risks with such opportunities when one will not live to correct mistakes. There’s a high probability that the Masterplan’s vision will not materialise. People will move into the flats, but the area will never thrive because good shops and restaurants will not take up the higher-cost commercial units. The area will not be sunny and bustling. It will be grim and quiet.

Many factors make this likely. A dark, cold and windy area cannot thrive as a shopping and dining destination. Strong winds now rip through the Tally Ho triangle because of a single 16-storey building. Regal claims that adding more tall buildings will not make it

worse, but it will not make it better either. It’s extremely hard to predict what will happen to wind among a cluster of tall buildings. There’s a strong chance that, once the blocks are built, the wind will turn out to be worse than



**Regal's plan for North Finchley town centre**

predicted. Much of the area will also be in year-round shadow. The “public square” and other places next to the Masterplan buildings may turn out to be unappealing places to hang around. The artsdepot could again find itself stranded in an unloved location.

North Finchley town centre is not an attractive location for many retail and restaurant chains because it has no easily-accessible Tube station. Woodside Park station is 15 minutes away and down a steep hill. Bus connections are excellent, but that is limited compensation. Unfortunately, the most affluent customers prefer cars to buses, which will not be possible at Tally Ho as parking is eliminated. Chains will choose new developments next to the Tube in areas like Finchley Central, knowing that customers can easily get there from Tally Ho.

Many shops and restaurants may stay away until construction of the Masterplan is completed, which could take 10 years. Phase 1’s shops and restaurants will stay in limbo

while massive works continue on Plots 2 and 3 across the road. By the time construction is finished, many commercial units will have been empty for years and any novelty and “buzz” will have long gone.

There’s also no reason to believe that Tally Ho will inevitably become the focus of the town centre. The existing core to the north may establish itself solidly and remain. That compact area (Stanhope Road to Ravensdale Avenue) contains most of North Finchley’s dining and shopping, including several national chains. Lodge Lane will add a cinema, bowling alley and public space. This area will continue to develop during the many years that Tally Ho is engulfed by demolition and construction. By the time Tally Ho emerges from its chrysalis, it’s amenities and commercial assets may not be needed. The Masterplan development will languish as a giant residential eyesore with a bus depot, whose residents shop, eat, drink, bowl and watch films in the core of the town centre to the north. This would represent an abject failure to grasp the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity promised by Regal.

A key lesson from post-war urban development in the UK is that demolishing an entire area and then attempting to create an artificial urban environment can lead to disaster. Moreover, the taller you build, the more you can regret, as shown by Tally Ho’s existing Kingsway tower.

### **In conclusion**

The council is currently considering Regal’s planning application for the Masterplan. Because the council is in partnership with Regal, it may be minded to approve it. However, there is still a good chance of it being rejected. For that to happen the community will have to make its voice heard more loudly. The message should be simple and clear: the Masterplan is not the way to a better town centre. This planning application should be refused. The council’s original Strategy for North Finchley is a much better route. The council should now get on with the task of implementing that.

### **What you can do**

Objections can be lodged at <https://publicaccess.barnet.gov.uk/online-applications> up to this Tuesday May 13, quoting application number 25/1123/OUT. However, an easier way is to email **Planning.consultation@barnet.gov.uk**. These emails can be submitted after 13 May. You must quote the application number and location (North Finchley Town Centre), give your name and address (it won't be considered otherwise), state that you object and then say why.