Battle of the Bulbs shows locals are switching on to people power

It is possible for residents to defeat planning applications, says **Jon Robins,** but you must be vigilant

Raging against the dying of the light: protesters in Hanwell, west London, where the council is trying to remove antique lampposts.

THE LOCAL press call it the 'Battle of the Bulbs' but, frankly, it's more like an Ealing comedy: local authority workers deployed to remove 55 antique Victorian lampposts from four roads around Hanwell in west London were forced to down tools this month following a peaceful protest by 50 incensed locals.

The police were called in to, as the *Ealing Gazette* put it, 'calm the crowd'. 'They sent three policewomen from Acton in anti-stab vests to deal with a bunch of middle-class conservationists over antique lampposts,' says Carolyn Brown, a member of the local Lawns Residents Association (who went armed only with hot coffee for the workers).

If the residents were upset when Ealing Council announced they were to lose their 100-year-old lampposts as part of an upgrade of street lighting without (they claim) public consultation, they were livid when they found out that, in fact, the council wasn't going to scrap the swan-necked Victorian lights but relocate them – to a different and posher part of the borough.

The plan is that their lampposts are to be moved from Hanwell (ironically, a conservation area) to the area around Ealing Studios. That area has just been designated a 'heritage quarter' so that the council can, as Conservative council leader Jason Stacey puts it, 'create an area, close to the borough's main attractions, which can properly replicate the heritage of our borough'.

'The council never told us that they were moving our lights,' says Lauren Wall, who lives on Manor Court Road, one of the roads which is to lose its lampposts. 'They simply announced that they were making a heritage quarter and as part of that they would be refurbishing old lights.'

It only transpired later that the old lighting, so representative of Ealing, was actually their own. In return, Hanwell locals would receive 'heritage' lights (in other words, replicas of old ones). 'People move into this area because it has a particular Victorian and Edwardian feel to it,' says Wall. 'We appreciate heritage and if it's valued by people who want to keep it and valued by those who want to take it, then why isn't Ealing Council talking to both groups? You'd think that they would find out what the majority of people want and would be fair to everybody. We all pay our council tax and we all expect to be represented.'

An argument about lampposts may seem trivial, but 'it illustrates a growing gap between the government's rhetoric of "listening" to communities and people's experience on the ground', says Hugh Ellis, head of planning at Friends of the Earth. 'National and local government find it hard to listen to communities and the truth is that they too often regard people as a problem.'

Next week there are local elections up and down the country. It is the perfect opportunity for campaigners concerned by local issues such as fast-food restaurants opening up opposite schools, the bulldozing of much-loved playgrounds, and the seemingly unstoppable homogenisation of our high streets as a result of the spread of chains such as McDonald's, Starbucks, Tesco et al (see box).

'If you can say you represent 200 people in your ward, you'll see councillors jump up and down and get very worried. It's a fantastic time for lobbying,' says Nancy Astley, deputy director of Planning Aid for London, which gives free town planning advice to individuals and groups.

The message from the planning experts is that if you want to protect your community, early intervention in the planning system is the best policy. 'Once a planning application is in, you have a right to object,' says Astley. 'But you only get 21 days for consultation and, unfortunately for most community groups, the minimum requirement for notification is a notice on those buildings that are next door or to one side. Most groups aren't aware of the planning applications that come in.'

'The council never told us they were moving our lights to another part of the borough'

Astley suggests that concerned residents form community groups, or join existing ones, to ensure that they receive the regular list of planning applications. 'You can divvy the work out between you because often you might have 300 or 4 a week,' she adds.

'It's all too easy to miss the boat a only become aware of a new Tesco Starbucks when permission to devel has been granted – and that can be t late,' says Paul Stookes, an environmen law expert at specialist law firm Richa Buxton. 'Another advantage of formin community group is that you can becor a lobbying force in your own right a have input into planning policy.' He s up the Environmental Law Foundatio which advises local campaigners abo the planning system (www.elflaw.org).

Residents are often pessimistic abo their ability to have any impact on t planning system, but Astley points o recent legislative attempts to bri communities into the planning syste such as the Planning and Compulso Purchase Act 2004. It replaced develo ment plans, which took years to wri and adopt and were used to decide app cations, with 'local development fram works', a portfolio of documents allow ing for consultation at an early stage planning policy.

'They also include a "statement community involvement", a docume outlining the way the planning depar ments will actively seek communi engagement in planning, the resourc allocated to that engagement and whe campaigner Gay Brown advises campaig ers to 'know your rights and get acce to information'. She has been fightin against an out-of-town Tesco superst in Yiewsley in the London borough of H lingdon since 1994. She says that by la (planning policy statement 6), both cou cil and developers are required to invol locals 'at the earliest possible point'. Y are also entitled to a copy of every doc ment that the developer submits.

You can also make your point at cou cil meetings – though you need to che your speaking rights first, which va from council to council. Brown recko as a rule of thumb, a petition wins ca paigners five minutes of speaking ti and you need 25 signatures for each p tion. She reckons five such slots could enough for you to make your case.

Can such campaigns be successf Well, Brown claims to have been invol in 28 successful campaigns against Te with only three failures.

■ *For more information, see www.elfl org and www.planningaid.rtpi.org.uk For Gay Brown's campaigners' guide the planning system, see www.tescop org. Friends of the Earth runs a Powe Up course for local campaigners (for more information, see www.foe.co.uk*