

First Jewish 'freedom zone' wins approval

By John Grigsby, Local Government Correspondent

BRITAIN is to have its first major "eruv"—a designated area where Orthodox Jews can move freely on the Sabbath—after a decision by Mr John Gummer, the Environment Secretary, yesterday.

He allowed an application by the United Synagogue eruv committee to install 85 poles and wires to define part of an 11-mile perimeter in the Golders Green and Hendon areas of Barnet, north London, as an eruv.

Mr Gummer's controversial decision is likely to lead the way for applications for other eruven in areas where there is a large Jewish community such as Manchester. They are already common in other countries—the centre of Washington, for example, is an eruv.

Barnet's planning committee originally turned down the application. It had led to divisions within the Jewish and the wider community.

Opponents said that the posts would be ugly and the proposal would be seen as favouring a small part of the population. But Mr Gummer accepted the advice of his inspector, Mr David Busby, to decide the matter purely on town planning grounds and not take into account wider social considerations.

He agreed that the poles, just under 20ft tall, would not seriously harm the character and appearance of the area, including five sites within Hampstead Garden Suburb conservation area.

The eruv is a legal and religious concept which converts public into private space for the purpose of observing the Sabbath. While Orthodox Jews may carry objects inside the home, they generally cannot do so outside.

This means they cannot

take such things as handkerchiefs or keys to the synagogue or even push prams or wheelchairs. The poles and wire fill the gaps between normal boundaries to the zone such as buildings.

Yesterday, Mr Alan Williams, who became Labour leader of the council after the local government elections in May, said: "The decision is now made. All those opposed have had their day in court. I hope the whole community will allow the eruv to go ahead without disruption."

However, Mr Roy Shutz, his Tory predecessor, a member of the Reform Synagogue and a councillor for the garden suburb, an opponent of the eruv, said that he believed that many local people would legally try to take the matter further.

"The difficulty is that many people see the issue as being far wider than a simple matter of planning."

"Something is going to happen to the locality, even if the wires are invisible. By favouring a particular group of people, and one small section in that group, the decision is going to change the character of the area."

The United Synagogue was unavailable for comment because members were observing the Feast of Tabernacles.

However, speaking after sunset, Mrs Eva Greenspan, a member of Barnet's planning committee who supported the eruv, said: "It had to be judged solely on planning grounds, and I could see no planning grounds for refusal."

Poles and wire already designate a small eruv at the entrance to a private estate in the area.