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HEADLINE: GUMMER ALLOWS FIRST JEWISH ERUV

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BODY:

THE Environment Secretary, John Gummer, has given the go-ahead for Britain's first Jewish Orthodox eruv in north-west London, in the face of bitter controversy in the area.

The eruv, a symbolically enclosed area in which the rules of the Jewish sabbath can be relaxed, was the subject of a two-week planning inquiry last November after two council decisions to refuse planning permission. Residents in Golders Green and Hendon, where the eruv is to be established, claimed it was socially divisive.

But Mr Gummer accepted the inspector's recommendation that the eruv would not seriously harm the character and appearance of the area, it was announced yesterday.

The eruv is an area six miles square, mostly bounded by roads and railway lines. But just over half a mile of the boundary will comprise 85 poles connected by thin wire.

Jeffrey Segall, who will have one of the poles outside his house, said: "I'm devastated by yesterday's decision. It will give the licence for repeat performances in the rest of the country.

"I will be confronted with the threat of a pole right next to our house. As a non-religious person, it symbolises nationalism and neo-Nazism to me. It is totally intolerable."

The eruv will particularly benefit parents of young children or those in wheelchairs because of the prohibition on pushing or carrying on the Sabbath, according to Jewish Orthodox law, argued its backers. The eruv was proposed by the United Synagogue and was heavily promoted by the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, and Lord Jakobovits, the former chief rabbi.

But some Jews perceived it as ghettoisation. It was opposed by public figures who lived in Hampstead Garden Suburb such as Lord McGregor, chairman of the Press Complaints Commission, and Lord Soper.

Norma Blaustein, a Jewish resident, fears that it will change the character of the suburb.

"My immediate reaction is of consternation.

"The eruv will encourage a particular group of people to dwell here with their customs, style and dress.

"The United Synagogue and the Chief Rabbi represent only 2 per cent of the entire Jewish population. They are a very small minority foisting their wishes on the rest of the community - that is bad in itself. We will continue the protest."

Frank Davis, a Conservative councillor for the Hampstead Garden Suburb, was relieved by the decision, though he had opposed the eruv.

"We can only hope that there will now be harmony and the deep divisions within the Jewish community and with parts of the non-Jewish community who were so opposed to it, will be healed."

No Orthodox Jews were available for comment yesterday because of the festival of Yom Kippur.

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