

From Malcolm Cox

I write to raise objections to the proposed Waterhouse Square developments.

I have lived in the Beauchamp Building for over twenty-five years. As someone who has lived and worked in Camden for many years and continues to do business in the area, I am fully supportive of having modern office space that supports local economic prosperity. However, not at any cost. I believe all new developments should support Camden's aims for the environment and contribute to the wider needs of the community.

The overriding concern is the lack of trust and transparency between the developers and the community. Communication is at best poor and seemingly disingenuous.

In September the residential community became very concerned as they slowly became aware of the developers' intentions, particularly about claims made by the developers that they had engaged with the residential community in April. In fact, they had held a meeting with Councillor Olad around that time who provided them with a list of residential blocks to engage with. As they ignored his suggestion, yet claimed that they had, actioned it, concerns began to develop in the community.

Two meetings between residents and the developers in late September and October did begin to alleviate some concerns. However, at the meeting the developers explicitly stated that there were no plans to include a bar – licenced premises – in their development. And now we discover that plans have been revised to include exactly that.

The developers also failed to communicate with residents plans to “infill existing atria providing additional office space”. The first the community heard of such plans was notification that the council had approved them

In short, these developers can't be trusted to do what they say.

Overall, we believe that the developers underestimate the characteristics of the area, they deem it primarily non-residential. And subsequently, disregard the concerns of the residential community

In fact, many hundreds of people live in the vicinity of Waterhouse Square and will be impacted by the proposals.

It's a very diverse mix. Ranging from the Lodge, run by St Mungo's, housing very vulnerable people who are being transitioned from being homeless to rehabilitation into the wider community, through to relative luxury of apartments in the Beauchamp Building and new Brooke Street developments.

Many residents live in blocks run by the council, for example Cranley and Brookes Court or housing association, Langdale.

While the area has a strong residential community, most people recognise, indeed value, that they live in a mixed-use environment. The leather lane market and surrounding office buildings, Hatton Garden jewellers, were around long before we lived here and no doubt long after we have gone. We also have a mosque sitting next to a protestant high church!

Community issues have tended to be relatively detailed. Concerns about market traders violating environmental health issues or outbreaks of anti-social behaviour in the Brookes Market square, finding a parking space, being typical day to day concerns. But the proposed developments of Waterhouse Square seem different. A bigger scale and potentially bigger impact on people's lives.

If the developers were listening to the community, rather than paying lip service, they would understand that a new licenced bar was at best insensitive and at worse likely to contribute to anti-social behaviour or have a detrimental impact on some vulnerable residents.

The lack of trust brings concerns about specific aspects of the developers' proposals.

Individual properties are concerned about the reduction of natural light They want to know if the survey submitted by the developer is robust? What if it isn't? They are keen to understand their rights and the developer's responsibilities to them. There is also some thought that there are other properties potential impacted by their plans that have not been surveyed

Traffic and neighbourhood management. Short term impact from pollution and general health and safety concerns re access. Some strategic questions around a conflict in the council's approach to net zero and some genuine concerns around personal health and emergency access. The developers are now saying this gets dealt with after the initial approval of plans is this the case.

Impact on public realm post development. Potential increase in ASB. The developers are saying this sits with Camden's plans for the Brookes Market square – currently fenced off to house Brookes Court builders' huts and tools and the no man's land area east of Greville Street/ Leather Lane which has hosted illegal raves in the past. What are the council's plans for this?

The approach to residential communications and engagement being generally poor an afterthought reacting to community pressure.

A lot of this angst could be alleviated by not building an additional floor on top of the building. Residents fail to understand why the developers won't refurbish and intend to knock down and rebuild. The developers appear to say that they need to rebuild the infrastructure in order to add the extra floor. And they need the extra floor to increase the marketability of the property. We would like to robustly challenge that view.

Post pandemic demand for central London office space has declined. But our area has bucked the trend. Driven partly by fashion – EC1 is the place for the media, advertising and technology communities and partly by access, as Lord Adonis has observed, the Elizabeth line has far exceeded its passenger targets with Farringdon footfall increasing significantly.

I do understand that the council is under financial pressure and revenue generated by office developments is useful to alleviate budget concerns elsewhere. However, this should not be done in a way which impacts other goals that impact the quality of residential life and broader physical and mental health.

Surely, we should be encouraging the developers to refurbish what they have, reduce their overall budget and still show a good return on their investment. And then eliminate the issues around light, reduce the disruption on residential lives and not blow a hole in Camden's environment policies?