

Objection to proposed increase in the height of buildings and the number of dwellings in the O2 Centre Phase 1 development (2025/0484/P)

Summary of objections

I strongly object to this proposal to grow an already excessively large, tall, densely-built and populated development, both in terms of the number of extra dwellings and the increased heights of almost all of the already excessively-tall buildings in Phase 1.

This Section 73 Planning Application seeks to substantially grow the size and scale of the already extremely large and dense Phase 1 development at the O2 site by a further 43 units, some 7% beyond the 650 previously consented by the Camden Planning Committee in March 2023, when the more stringent fire regulations requiring 2 staircases were already well-understood and could easily have been addressed at the time by slightly delaying the original Planning Application.

Future 'scope-creep' through repeated use (abuse?) of the Section 73 process?

This S73 Application suggests that the extra 43 units proposed for Phase 1, will result in a commensurate reduction in the number of units subsequently built in Phases 2 and 3 (thus leaving intact the original Masterplan target of 1800 homes).

Unfortunately there is no guarantee that the developer will not, in future, simply renege on this promise (as they have now done with the consent granted in March 2023) and will then also seek to grow the numbers of dwellings in each of Phases 2 & 3 in their subsequent 'Detail Element' Applications (with potentially a further 'Section 73' variation for each later phase). They could simply propose increasing the heights of all future buildings by 2-floors, citing the precedent that the current S73 application would set for building height increases, if it were to be misguidedly approved now.

If this self-serving approach were to be followed by the developer, then instead of the total of 1800 units for which outline consent has been obtained, the entire development would grow to at least some 1926 units. This would further exacerbate the over-densification of the site and would starkly underline the huge under-provision of green space and other local amenities for what could be some 4800 residents living in a site area of only 5.7 hectares, compared with the current outline target of some 4500 residents, which is already wholly excessive for such a small site.

Can the developer be trusted to act in good faith going forward, and not seek to indulge in this further 'scope-creep' by committing now to no further attempts to use Section 73 Applications in the future for Phases 2 and 3 in order to increase any further building heights and footprints? Can the developer now commit to Camden not to attempt to do this, or can this be a condition placed on the developer by Camden?

Abuse/misuse of the Section 73 process – surely a new Planning Application is needed instead?

This is also a clear abuse of the Section 73 Planning Application provisions (under the 1990 Town & Country Planning Act) which is intended for minor, non-material, changes to a previous Planning Application. The changes in the current S73 Application are clearly material, rather than minor. For example Section 73 would allow minor increases in height - typically up to 1-2 metres, not the full 5.9 metres (2 floors) here being proposed.

Section 73 also defines the following key limitations to an application under the statute: 'Changes must not substantially increase overshadowing or overlooking'. In contrast, the changes proposed in this application clearly further negatively impact the access to sunlight and daylight for all the dwellings to the north of the site in Rosemont Road and Lithos Road. These have already been so badly impacted, in terms of loss of daylight and sunlight, by the March 2023 permissions, and the further height increases would further significantly harm neighbouring amenity.

The developer should now show some good faith with local residents and instead submit an entirely new overall Planning Application, rather than seek to misrepresent changes that are actually major, and material, as only minor changes, and thereby abuse and subvert the intentions of the Section 73 process. To allow this scale of change in a Section 73 application would entirely compromise Camden's Planning Integrity.

Community feedback is ignored and Statement of Community Involvement is a 'Whitewash'

The developer has consistently ignored community feedback over substantive issues with this development for several years now, and has made only token gestures to amend its planning proposal in response to community feedback. The 'Statement of Community Involvement' (SCI) is a masterpiece of repetitive 'spin' and 'virtue-signalling' over substance. It largely ignores the feedback on really important, substantive issues for local and future residents.

These include the wholly excessive massing and heights of multiple closely-packed Soviet-style towers and the consequent population density in such a small site, and lack of adequate green space for such a large new population of some 4500, and eventually the removal of the highly-valued O2 Centre (which already provides many of the community facilities discussed in the 'Consultation', and includes the many cinema screens, the gym and the large Sainsburys, Aldi and Waterstones stores and the many restaurants), and instead focusses incessantly on relatively trivial second- and third-order issues.

During their Autumn so-called 'consultation', the developer promised to publish verbatim all of the comments received via the 'Commonplace' platform during the 'consultation' held in October/November 2024 in the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) that was to be submitted as part of this S73 application.

Lack of visibility of public feedback in the Statement of Community Involvement

However, most regrettably, the developer has now openly reneged on this promise, as the recently-published SCI still does not contain a concise summary of all the public comments received. This shows more of the same contempt for local residents who take the time to browse the 'consultation' materials in-person, or online, and who leave their comments in good faith, yet see their comments buried and ignored, simply so that the developer can get a 'tick-in-the-box' as far as community involvement is concerned. This is a cynical exercise in one-way community involvement with no real intention of ever actually listening to, publicising, and addressing, the concerns that the community is consistently and repeatedly expressing.

The developer will be well aware of how unpopular amongst local residents the extant proposal already was at the time of its original approval by Camden in March 2023, largely on the grounds of excessive numbers of dwellings, excessive population density and excessive building heights/massing and wholly inadequate green space provision for the approximately 4500 new residents that it would eventually bring to the only 5.7 hectare site.

Local residents were, and are, not against making better use of the car park space and the footprint of the former much-loved Homebase store, and repurposing that space for much-needed housing (and especially for genuinely affordable social housing, not just discounted market rent), but it is the sheer scale of buildings and number of dwellings and numbers that are the problem. Even the existing, approved plans do not strike the right balance between new homes and community benefits. The latest proposed changes will seemingly tilt the balance even further towards meeting only the developer's need to make a sufficiently generous profit, at the expense of the well-being, and quality of life of its own future residents, whose needs are being treated with contempt.

Further adverse impact on the already wholly insufficient provision of green/open space

To suggest that the gaining of some further 'open/green space', said to be roughly equivalent to the size of a tennis court (some 260 sq m), as a result of the footprint saved by not building one tower), is in any way a compensation for then needing to accommodate a further 125 residents on the Phase 1 site (50 extra proposed units @ 2.5 residents per unit), is deeply cynical, and shows further contempt for the well-being of the unfortunate future residents of the development.

Camden's own Local Plan Policy A2, sets out a requirement of 9 sq. metres of open space per occupant. This would imply an open space requirement at the overall O2 site of 40,000 – 45,000 sq. m, (Based on an assumed average occupation rate of 2.5 people per flat, the development may currently be expected to accommodate up to 4,500 residents).

The current consented proposals for the eventual total provision of open/green space within the full 5.7 ha site is only some 15,000 sq. m. This is just one third of Camden's own policy requirement – within the surrounding area of West/South Hampstead, that is already officially recognised as green-space deprived.

To now consider that the provision of a further open space only "the size of a tennis court" is sufficient to meet the extra open space needs of a further 125 people, is entirely fatuous. A full tennis court is some 260 sqm in area and by applying Camden's Policy A2, that space would be sufficient for only a further 29 people; not the 125 further people that the developer is now attempting to cram in! So again, the degree of under-provision of green/open space is huge compared with this further proposed increase in the number of residents. Only between 25% and 30% of the extra open space required (by Camden's A2 Policy guidelines calculated for 125 extra residents) is actually being offered in this revised proposal for Phase 1.

Engagement of Design Studio to 'humanise' the development proposals

The revelation of the engagement of a well-known Design Studio tasked with 'humanising the project and evolving the design' is both telling and, rather cynical. It confirms that the developer agrees that the existing architect's Masterplan is not sympathetic, people-friendly, or in any way human-scale (any lay observer could have identified that right away, based on the plans and pictures previously provided), but it also reveals the cynical thought process that perhaps now applying a modicum of so-called 'good design' could in any meaningful way alleviate such a fundamental problem posed by the excessive massing and heights of so many, closely-spaced, Soviet-style, walls of towers. The phrase 'like putting lipstick on a pig' sadly comes to mind!

The provision of endless highly-stylised and over-optimistic artists impressions of verdant sunlit gardens and play areas on lawns around the Soviet-style blocks is yet another rather disingenuous

and cynical exercise in 'marketing spin' over substance. They also neatly gloss over the fact that the very tall buildings with only very narrow spaces between them will create many very windy, and sunless canyons which no-one will wish to linger in, or around. The well-understood wind-tunnel ('venturi') effect will ensure that there are unacceptably strong winds around the bases of all the buildings for much of the time.

Also, a large proportion of the open/green space between the 'front row' of buildings will only get direct sunlight during the middle part of the day. At other times when the sun is more to the East and then the West, these spaces between buildings in the front row will also be in shadow like the actual 'wind tunnels' between the very high buildings in the second row, which will rarely get any sun at all.

Previous misleading description of the detailed changes now being proposed

The previous '[Exhibitions Boards' documentation](#) (on which residents feedback was gathered during the 'consultation' in the Autumn of 2024, was extremely disingenuous in not also explicitly mentioning that the 'N4C' tower is now seemingly being increased in depth (front to back) by some 25% (5.9m deeper), so that it is now to be the same depth as the currently-larger 'N5A' tower next to it, as well as 2 –floors higher. This increase in depth of an already much taller (and now with this S73 application, taller still) block was conveniently not highlighted and was buried in the detail. So the overall problem of excessive massing is further compounded in the case of N4C.

So, whilst the 10-storey 'N4D' tower is now being proposed for removal under this 'Section 73' application, some 30-35% of its former footprint is actually now being added to the footprint and greater massing of the tallest tower 'N4C' (which is now also proposed to be even taller by some 5.9m at 16, rather than 14, stories). Almost all the rest of the footprint of the former 'N4D' tower now seems to be taken up by the re-located Community Centre, so it is not clear where the extra 'tennis-court's-worth' of green space is actually being added at ground level?

The new drawings appear to show a roof garden on the proposed relocated, stand-alone, Community Centre. But if this roof garden is not generally accessible by the public (which is unlikely as it would require access through the Community Centre up a flight of stairs?), then you cannot claim that it genuinely adds to the green space/green corridor that comprise the 'linear park' at Ground level. Presumably there would in fact be limited and controlled staircase access to the roof garden on the Community Centre, so it cannot then be counted towards the 'tennis-court's-worth' of genuinely-public green space that is allegedly being added to the ground-level green-space.

Close examination of diagrams in the latest 'Design & Access Statement' Page 37 ('5.1 Evolving the Detailed Element') also shows surreptitious and unacknowledged growth in size of the building N5B (right next to where the now-removed N4D tower was), which seemingly is growing in width by some 12% and depth by a smaller amount. Together it seems this will result in a growth in floor area of some 22%. Why has this not been mentioned or acknowledged in the Design & Access Statement. Is this an example of yet more bad news being buried?

Where with all the alleged new 'green-space' is there room for a basket-ball/netball court for example, to cater for the large numbers of new younger residents wishing to use the 'green space' for local sports recreation?

Even more excessive proportion of Single Aspect Dwellings than was previously the case?

In the consented version of Phase 1 (in March 2023) some 45% of the 608 homes proposed in the detailed proposal were to be single aspect, broken down as follows: Private – 420 homes, 210 single aspect; Social rent – 104 homes, 10 single aspect; Intermediate – 84 homes, 52 single aspect.

This already flagrantly breached the requirement of London Plan Policy D6 that housing development *“should normally avoid the provision of single aspect dwellings.”* No effort is made to meet the requirement of London Plan Policy D6 that *“a single aspect dwelling should only be provided where it is considered a more appropriate design solution to meet the requirements of Part B in Policy D3 Optimising site capacity through the design-led approach than a dual aspect dwelling, and it can be demonstrated that it will have adequate passive ventilation, daylight and privacy, and avoid overheating”* resulting in a significant policy conflict, and sub-optimal/uncomfortable conditions for many future residents.

Unfortunately it now appears that you are cynically reducing even further the number of dual-aspect units, by removing tower N4D and re-providing them in the now much larger, and taller, block N4C (page 37 of the Design & Access Statement refers). This loss of dual aspect units will disproportionately affect the units designated for ‘Low Cost Rent’ (ie the genuinely social housing element). One might infer that you are treating the needs of future Social housing residents with a degree of contempt and instead sacrificing their comfort and needs in favour of improved profit margins?

Conclusion

I object to the changes in height, massing and density in this Section 73 application, which all exceed the extent of changes that are permissible in a S73 Application. Camden Planning should not allow the credibility and integrity of the process to be compromised in this way. It will open up the possibility of ever-greater abuses/misuses of the S73 process in future potential applications from large developers, relating both to later phases on this site, and to other major development sites in Camden such as 100 Avenue Road, Swiss Cottage.

Please reduce the scale of the proposals for growing the size of the Phase 1 development, so that they are genuinely ‘minor’ changes that are eligible for consideration under the ‘Section 73’ process.

The current proposals greatly exceed this threshold and will adversely affect conditions both for future residents of the development and for existing residents around the site.

If a substantial increase in the number of dwellings and residents and building heights is required then a completely new planning application must be submitted with a Financial Viability Assessment that justifies the continued under-provision of genuinely affordable social housing.

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