**APP 2014/5946/P Former GPO Sorting Office New Oxford Street WC1**

**BCAAC Statement of Objection**

The Bloomsbury Conservation Area was one of the first conservation areas to be designated in England following the Civic Amenities Act 1967. The Advisory Committee was established by Camden Council in 1968.

The Advisory Committee has been represented at several meetings with the applicant, when its opposition to the proposed development was forcefully expressed. It also conducted a site visit to see the interior of the Post Office building, given the fact that much of the existing structure is to be retained. It was very impressed by the immense scale of the internal spaces and their potential for creative and cultural use, demonstrated most recently in the splendid pop-up art show held immediately before Christmas 2014 on the ground and basement floors.

**HARMFUL IMPACTS**

While this site is not included in the conservation area, it is immediately bounded on three sides by the designated area and lies between the Bloomsbury and Seven Dials CAs and in a very prominent location, which increases its significance and the harmful impacts on both areas. That on Bloomsbury would be the most severe. It can be rightly claimed that this site is on the national/international stage given the millions of visitors to the British Museum each year.

**Local views**

There are two important local views within the Conservation Area, in which the development would appear unduly dominant.

Museum Street looking north

Firstly, northwards up Museum Street where views of the magnificent tower and steeple of St George’s Church, listed at Grade I, can be enjoyed. This is also one of the finest pieces of architecture in Camden. This view has been identified by the Advisory Committee and local organisations as deserving of protection and careful consideration. The importance of St George’s Church was recognised by a grant of over £9m for the recent restoration, including the reintroduction of the splendid pairs of lions and unicorns at the base of the steeple. So now we can enjoy it much as it was when Hogarth portrayed it in the 1750s.

While the existing building is clearly present within this view, it defers to the church in the way that the façade ‘folds away’ to reveal more of Hawksmoor’s tower and steeple, rather than terminating in a typical right-angled corner.

The proposed replacement building, in contrast, would obscure views of the tower and steeple from street level, currently enjoyed by the public and in others, would dominate and diminish Hawksmoor’s masterpiece. The authoritative objection from the World Monuments Fund is particularly relevant here and their concerns are illustrated by the views undertaken by the applicant at the request of BCAAC and the BPRA and produced by local objectors.

Museum Street looking south

The second significant local view is looking and walking south down Museum Street, from Great Russell Street. In fact, it is a sequential, focused view with the development site acting as a termination. However, far from creating a more appropriately scaled ‘end stop,’ it would exaggerate all the negative aspects of the existing situation and make it far worse.

The existing building already has a seriously negative impact on the numerous listed buildings lining the street and is visible from the forecourt of the British Museum (listed Grade I). While it terminates the view relatively abruptly, its bulk is reduced by the upper levels being significantly set back and of a different architectural expression. This significantly mitigates the harm caused by its mass.

The proposed building comprises a significant increase in bulk and height and would have substantial and unmitigated negative impacts on this view of the consistent listed streetscape and from the British Museum itself. These unacceptable impacts can be fully appreciated by the photomontages produced by local objectors.

**Impact on heritage assets and setting**

The public can readily enjoy the views described above, they are attractive views looking into and out of the Conservation Area and clearly within its setting. Because it is directly visible from the courtyard the Post Office building also falls directly within the setting of the Grade I listed St George’s Church and British Museum. The scheme would intrude on an important and attractive view of St George’s Church and damage the appreciation of the historic streetscape looking south down Museum Street. The existing building is not a great asset, but the proposed building would cause new and greater harm.

Contrary to the startling claims made on behalf of the applicant, the proposal would neither preserve nor enhance the character or appearance of the Conservation Area or its setting, or those of the listed buildings it contains. Considerable weight should be given by decision-makers to the desirability of preserving the setting of all heritage assets, including Grade I and II listed buildings. This weight is increased in proportion to the importance of the features affected. St George’s Church, the British Museum and this part of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area can be considered as ‘blue chip’ heritage assets. Huge numbers of visitors are drawn to this part of London for its architectural beauty and historical associations. To significantly raise the height and massing of the built form in this location, apparently to match that of the Travelodge tower on the west side of Museum Street, should be unacceptable in such an important and sensitive location.

Therefore, the Advisory Committee considers that the proposal would cause substantial harm to the heritage assets in the area.

**The use**

The Council has expressed a desire for this site to provide a “visionary sustainable mixed use development” and indeed this is what the site, the surrounding area and the existing building, if retained, demands. However, what is on offer nowhere meets this laudable objective. Instead, we are offered a speculative office development, entirely alien to the area, with a massive office entrance on Museum Street itself, sterilizing the most significant frontage with some retail consigned to the less attractive frontage.

Other changes include the provision of some open space, some housing tucked away on the most unappealing part of the site, below the requirements and a small doctor’s surgery. The proposed open space at roof level would have limited access, both in terms of opening hours and numbers of potential users and is confined to the least attractive part of the roof. The best area would be on the west – which is being reserved for office use. T

These ‘token’ amendments in no way compensate for the substantial harm to heritage that would be caused by the proposal.

**Conclusion**

Accordingly, The Advisory Committee strongly advises that this development should be roundly rejected due to the substantial harm that it would cause to this much loved area of recognised heritage value and character. It would neither preserve nor enhance the listed buildings, their settings or that of the Conservation Area, or its character and appearance, contrary to local and national policy.

*BCAAC Jan 26th 2015*