30th April 2016

Planning objection Reference 2016/1690/P

**Abacus School Project, Downshire Hill, London NW3 (“Abacus”)**

I object to the above planning application on the following grounds:

**1 Lack of demonstrated demand:**

A potential scandal arises from the proposed use of Abacus as a free school or Academy for primary school children, when there is no substantiated demand in the designated catchment area of Belsize Park. The Chair of Governors claims in a press article that there is “massive oversubscription” for schools in NW3.

Yet the evidence is to the contrary and proves that there is simply no demand for additional primary school places in the Hampstead or Belsize Park areas. For example:

* There are over 30 schools in the immediate area, one of the highest concentrations in London**,** serving a relatively stable population.
* I understand that Camden Council’s plans assume more primary places than pupils in 2017.
* The existing Abacus school was set up to serve Belsize Park, a nearby area and currently has less than 50 students. It is located quite far away in Kings Cross and children are taken by bus. The demand for places from Belsize Park has been so modest that the existing school has a majority of pupils coming from other areas, some even further away.
* The new site in Hampstead is on the extreme edge of the stated “Belsize Park” catchment area.

**2 Poor use of public resources**

Because the site was expensive, to justify the investment in an almost Kafkaesque manner, the school numbers have been **increased** from the original 210 to 420 – yet the current school struggles to fill its desks from the area.

I appreciate that there a political difference of opinion between Camden and Central Government on free schools. Nevertheless, the issues here should have some common ground -the best use of scarce public resource for education - regardless of whether free schools are desirable or not.

**Abacus in Downshire Hill, as currently planned, is a poor use of scarce public resources and thus against the public interest.** Instead the site could be sold and the proceeds used towards several new schools in areas where there is pressing need for school places.

Camden can show the way of presenting economic sense alongside political goals and a way around the bureaucratic momentum.

3 **Traffic**: The NW3 area already suffers greatly from the impact of the “school run” because we have so many schools. Abacus’s site is between a congested main road and a small residential street and will cause **significant** harm to a number of streets, delay urgent traffic, such as to the nearby Royal Free Hospital and be unsafe for the pupils who will be dropped across the road and need to brave traffic.

Because so few of the pupils live close by, there will be up to 400 additional cars in the area to allow 420 students plus 30 staff to arrive and leave daily.

**The School claim that this will be mitigated by a “walk to school” policy is risible, given it admits that it is unenforceable and the fact the parents at all the other schools find no alternative to cars.**

4 **Overbuilt Site**: In order to justify the high purchase cost, the numbers were recently doubled to 420 pupils. The proposed building is unsuitable for so many children; the latest design has crammed the “playground” onto a netted rooftop, reminiscent of slum schools from the 1950’s. This would shame the reputation of Camden’s schools whether or not is under Council control.

There is simply no spare space for anything on the site let alone a safe “green” space for young children. It is a brick monolith and will represent a really poor exemplar of free schools.

5 **Design**: The design appears to be the product of a studio handling a number of schools. This one is in an important grade 2 listed building in a conservation area and on one of Camden’s iconic streets. It deserves appropriate treatment.

Instead, the design has “gaudy” bright bricks, crammed in utilities and does not attempt to blend in or make its own statement. The detail finish is a mess.

Further, the lack of space on site has forced the architect to include air-conditioning, as the building cannot self-ventilate as it should with a carbon neutral commitment.

6 **Environment**: The existing traffic already creates very poor air quality in the area at peak times; some of the worst in London. This school, with its poorly considered location, will add noticeably to this. Schools should be close to the children they serve, so they have the option of walking. This is not possible here. See also above for the unnecessary energy consumption.

We would be happy to discuss any of the above with you or your colleagues at the earliest convenience.

Yours Sincerely



Steven Bobasch