

Flat 3
Queen Alexandra Mansions
Grape Street
London WC2H 8DX



London Borough of Camden
Planning Team
5 Pancras Square
London N1C 4AG

By email

11 April 2022

Dear Sirs,

Planning application 2021/2954/P (*the Application*)

I refer to the Application, which seeks various planning approvals in relation to a number of different and separated parcels of land within the block of streets bounded, loosely, by High Holborn, Museum Street and New Oxford Street. The public highway known as West Central Street runs between these parcels, which include sites on each side of West Central Street, one of which backs on to the rear of Grape Street. Other parcels in the block are not comprised in the Application.

I went to the presentation at the weekend of the slightly modified Labtech plans for Selkirk House.

I will be writing separately with a number of further submissions about the Labtech proposals, but the purpose of this letter is to address one particular and crucial aspect.

I quote below the language from one of the Labtech propaganda boards on display:

Furthermore, refurbishment of the former Travelodge Tower significantly restricts the opportunity to deliver wider public realm enhancements, including the new public route through the site.

This implies that there is a trade-off between the (slightly reduced in height but increased in bulk) skyscraper and the proposed inclusion of Vine Lane in the proposals; conversely, that Selkirk House could be refurbished if the Vine Lane idea is dropped. It also leads to a suspicion that there may be a covert deal between Camden and Labtech along the lines of "We will let you have a skyscraper if you give us Vine Lane".

Perhaps you would be so kind as to indicate whether there is any credibility to this proposition. In this connection, I am aware of the sheer amount of engagement there has been between Labtech and Camden's officers in relation to these proposals.

In any event, any such trade-off would be problematic and unreasonable for a number of reasons, including:

- ∞ It is not for a private developer such as Labtech to decide what public realm improvements should be given priority;
- ∞ Nor is it for Labtech to decide, in policy terms, that a 74 metre tower in such a prominent position, on the edge of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area and close to key listed buildings and protected public spaces is a fair price to pay for a narrow and potentially unsafe passage from West Central Street leading to a busy and dangerous two way throughfare.
- ∞ The Vine Lane concept is currently the subject of at least two unfinished consultation exercises by Camden, namely the draft *Holborn Vision* and the recently revived *Site Allocations* consultation document. Camden's website makes clear that the Holborn Vision is paused; there will need to be a further consultation in due course. As to the Site Allocations consultation, I am aware that there has been considerable local opposition to the Vine Lane concept in responses to the Site allocation document. Camden has yet to revert on this. It would be wholly wrong for Labtech to be allowed to pre-empt the outcome of the public consultation process by foisting on an unwilling neighbourhood both an unsuitable skyscraper and a controversial and pointless passageway. I should add that I was surprised that Labtech were able to claim in another of its display boards that *Feedback to date on Vine Lane has been supportive...*and will separately be taking this up with them.
- ∞ Labtech acknowledge the problems of antisocial activity in the area where their various parcels are located. A narrow tunnel such as the proposed Vine Lane would only exacerbate these problems, but Labtech do not make any attempt to explain how they would be addressed or eliminated under the Labtech proposals.
- ∞ If Camden (not Labtech) thinks there needs to be a trade-off between a skyscraper and Vine Lane, it should be explicit and the subject of proper and transparent consultation and debate.

If it is correct that there is a trade-off as described above, my very strong preference is:

- ∞ To dispense with the Vine Lane proposal and allow Selkirk House to be refurbished;
or
- ∞ Alternatively, if, after full and proper consideration and evaluation, the Council is persuaded that not refurbishing Selkirk House is consistent with its (and central

government's) policies and principles, for the Vine Lane proposal to be abandoned and Selkirk House to be replaced by a lower, less bulky and less conspicuous building.

I should add that the sentence quoted above from Labtech makes quite clear that a refurbishment of Selkirk House is, in itself, a perfectly viable option for that part of the Labtech sites.

I note in passing that Labtech seem to be claiming credit for the existence of the public highway running through, and dividing, the parcels they have acquired (West Central Street) as a public realm improvement This is quite clearly illegitimate.

Please consider this a further representation in opposition to the Application. The views expressed in my letter of 14 July 2021 still stand, as do all my subsequent follow up submissions. The comments in this letter are entirely consistent with my July 2021 submissions. I understand that the planning team has confirmed that all the submissions received will be properly considered and taken into account before any recommendation is made to the planning subcommittee concerning the Application.

Please also confirm that Camden will not allow the concept of Vine Lane to become part of an approved planning application by default and without first completing its current and anticipated consultation exercises. Having launched two consultations, it is incumbent on Camden to take full and rational account of all the submissions made.

I will be copying this letter to Labtech's communications adviser. This is an open letter.

Yours faithfully,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the sender.