Planning Application 2022/2255/P

Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital, Frontage Building

I want to comment on the Statement of Community Engagement included in this application insofar as it relates to the local community and the Residents Liaison Group (RLG). The Statement lists the detailed steps that the applicant has to go through, and it appears that GOSH did formally take all of them. However, what the report does not convey is the quality of the interactions between GOSH, their contractors, and the local community. Because of failings in all these areas, GOSH has failed to meet its requirement to consult to consult effectively.

The RLG was set up in 2001 in response to concern at the lack of consideration being shown by the local hospitals – the National, the Homeopathic (as it then was) and, principally, GOSH – to the local community. GOSH agreed to service the meetings and did so efficiently until 2019 when minutes of meetings started taking months to be written. This slow-down coincided with the RLG’s firm opposition to the CCC plans and followed the only meeting that was attended by Mat Shaw, GOSH’s CEO.

From the start the RLG was chaired by a member of the local committee. Its remit covered all aspects of the hospitals’ interaction with the local community, from ambulances leaving their engines running while waiting for patients, to being the consultation body throughout major construction projects (such as the Zayed Centre on Guilford Street).

Membership of the RLG was never large and attendance at meetings was small. GOSH’s publicity for the RLG was never energetic and became less so as time went on – for example, with the Zayed Centre, at the start of the development a periodic newsletter about it was issued by GOSH’s contractors but this did not last for more than a few months.

But low attendance at meetings should not necessarily be seen as a failure as for quite long periods between 2001 and 2022 there were no major issues to deal with. But this all changed when we were told about the project which became the Children’s Cancer Centre.

From the start there were fundamental disagreements between GOSH and the community about this project, principally about how the work would be done, but also about its design. The RLG saw that the planned way of getting to and from the site, via Guilford Place, Lamb’s Conduit St, Great Ormond St and Boswell St, would be environmentally and socially disastrous. We proposed an alternative route, via Powis Place and the hospitals’ joint service yard on Guilford St (described as ‘unfit for purpose’ by a senior UCH official in 2017) and asked for it to be explored. For months we were told simply that this route ‘was not feasible’.

When eventually we were given some reasons for why ‘our’ route wasn’t feasible (October 2019), it was clear that GOSH’s approach was to assemble as many obstacles to the route as possible and say they were insurmountable, rather than saying that there were problems but that they would do everything possible to overcome them. The implicit message was ‘this is our plan and we have no intention of changing it’. We challenged this but the only response we got, from the newly-appointed Zoe Asensio Sanchez, was that we were ‘no longer fit for purpose’ and GOSH was withdrawing all involvement with the RLG immediately.

The RLG’s response to Zoe Asensio Sanchez was ‘*There is a widespread feeling in the area that there’s little point criticising GOSH’s plans because they always get what they want: if you want to “demonstrate broad and representative engagement with the local community” that is a feeling that you need to dispel, but you will not achieve that by simply getting rid of the existing consultation structure and replacing it with a new one’.*

GOSH set up a new consultation structure with a very narrow remit, limited to the CCC project alone (the withdrawal of co-operation with the RLG means that there is no longer any hospitals-wide local community forum).

When work on the CCC scheme began again after the pandemic the new group met virtually and face-to-face on a few occasions before the planning application went in. These meetings were characterised by an attitude that can be summarised as ‘We will politely note your objections and proposed changes and then tell you why they are not feasible’.

Comments include:

*Completely no reference to the community. The presentations and few member questions only showcased the hospitals work.*

*Basically the 'controlled' event was an opportunity for GOSH to thank themselves for their own work.*

*contractor.*

Attendance at these meetings was again small and whatever publicity GOSH did arrange was not very effective. This is shown by the large number of the objectors to the plans who say that before the Planning Application was advertised by Camden, they had no knowledge at all of the plans. GOSH’s failure in this instance is another example of their lack of concern about the community who live and work on their doorstep and in their neighbourhood.

Here are two final examples of this:

* The glossy printed prospectus, published when the CCC was first announced, amongst its many pages and thousands of words says nothing about how the Centre would fit into the local world. In its list of ‘deliverables’, the ninth and last is *‘buildings that are judged by patients and families to meet their needs’*: no mention of what the local community might need.
* Some people and groups have responded favourably to the Application, among them the Young People’s Forum. GOSH’s consultation with the Forum must be seen as something less that disinterested when it can lead to one young person claiming that the ‘*The noise pollution and disruption that may be caused by the building of this centre is no different to that of a civilian loft, or another construction project, which the residents would happily put up with.*

Overall, from the local community’s view it can fairly be said that GOSH and its contractors have not effectively fulfilled their obligations to consult about the CCC.

Michael Pountney

Chair, Residents Liaison Group