



St Quintin and Woodlands Neighbourhood Forum

95 Highlever Road. London W106PW
email info@stqw.org
0207 460 1743
www.stqw.org

Alice P Gast
President
Office of the President
Level 4 Faculty Building
Imperial College London
Exhibition Road
London, SW7 2AZ

26th September 2014

Dear President,

Imperial West

Welcome to your new role at Imperial. You must have many matters to deal with in your first few weeks. We are writing to ask that you find time to look at a number of public concerns that have arisen over the College's plans for its developments at Imperial West.

We are a 'neighbourhood forum', with a current membership of 360 residents and businesses in North Kensington. Such forums, once approved and designated by the relevant local authority, have powers under the 2011 Localism Act to prepare a neighbourhood plan for their area. If supported by a majority at a local referendum, such plans are adopted by the local authority and become part of the statutory planning framework for the area.

The St Quintin and Woodland Neighbourhood Forum is currently finalising the plan for this area, in discussion with RB Kensington & Chelsea. The Imperial West site lies within the originally proposed boundary of the neighbourhood area, but as a result of decisions by the former administration at LB Hammersmith & Fulham falls outside the currently designated neighbourhood area. Hence the College is not directly affected by the StQW Neighbourhood Plan.

Despite this, we ask you to recognise that our 360 members are the College's neighbours at Imperial West. Our area of two storey Edwardian housing lies just across the railway line, a hundred yards away. As the current phase of buildings are constructed, our streets will be dominated by a wholly new skyline to the west.

The StQW Forum, and its sister organisation the St Helens Residents Association, fought a long battle with the College and with Hammersmith & Fulham Council, over the proposals for Imperial West. While we welcome the arrival of the College as a neighbour, and respect the global academic achievements of Imperial, we felt from the start that the plans for Imperial West involved excessive building heights and densities.

It appeared to us that these development proposals became driven by commercial rather than academic goals, urged on by a team of planning consultants who have long had dealings with other landowners in White City and who have their own agendas. Leading politicians at Hammersmith & Fulham, in the 2006-10 and 2010– 2014 administrations shared this agenda, in pushing forward a series of major developments in White City East.

The former Council's re-write of the planning framework for the White City Opportunity Area gave a set of major landholders (Westfield, Stanhope, St James and the College's own JVC with Voreda Capital) the planning context needed to push at the limits (and in our view beyond the limits) of the planning policies set by London Plan.

The College's own reports and papers from 2010-13 make no secret of its desire to exploit a scenario in which the Mayor of London and the Leader of Hammersmith & Fulham Council were, for the time being, providing a shared and a supportive political climate in which the College could maximise income and capital gain from its first (and now second) landholding at Imperial West.

As you will know, the electorate of Hammersmith & Fulham chose, unexpectedly, to vote in a new Labour administration in May 2014. The previous council's unwillingness to listen to the views of its residents, coupled with its aggressively commercial planning policies, were one of the factors that led to this change.

In late 2014, we are where we are, in terms of some of the major planning decisions for White City that have already been made. These include the planning approval granted in 2013 for the 35 storey residential tower, along with the Research and Translation Hub on which construction has now started. But the tower has yet to be built, and the College has changed its plans for a 13 storey hotel on the former Woodlands site, in favour of the proposed Michael Uren Bio-Medical Centre.

This latest step is welcome to local people. It will mitigate the current impression that Imperial West is firstly a commercial development and only secondly an academic campus.

Given that revisions are now being made to the masterplan for Imperial West, we urge you to test with your colleagues, very thoroughly, whether it makes sense to continue to plans for the 35 storey residential tower.

As we have pointed out to Baroness Eliza Manningham Buller, this is one of some 230 very tall towers in the planning pipeline in London—of which 80% are being built for residential sales rather than as offices. Many commentators consider there will be a glut of such accommodation on the London property market, which will exceed the appetite of 'buy-to-leave' overseas investors.

Given a choice of 200 locations across London, why should offshore investors choose Imperial West, an air-pollution hotspot overlooking an elevated roundabout with the proposed pedestrian entrance/exit next to motorway entrance ramp? St James will be building a rather more attractive development of 1,500 new apartments, in towers a few hundred yards to the south of Imperial West (and nearer the Central Line). Give a choice of this location (and 200 other new residential towers across London) why should any buyer choose Imperial West?

We would ask that you question your colleagues closely on these issues. Local people do not wish to see a 35 storey tower built, blighting our lives, only to see it stand largely empty.

Our second request is that you look at the issue of the openness and transparency of the College in its property and investment dealings. Over several years, we have been trying to establish how the Imperial West development is being financed. A series of Freedom of Information requests have met with nothing substantive being released by the College, and limited information being released by Hammersmith & Fulham Council.

I am not familiar with how FoI works in relation to colleges and academic bodies in the US, but in the UK universities are (rightly) treated as public bodies to which FoI legislation applies. All our requests to the College have been met with the argument that commercial confidentiality overrides any public interest in disclosure. No financial information has been supplied to us.

We think it is wrong that the College should attempt to hide behind a cloak of commercial confidentiality. There are strong public interests at stake, not least the quantum of affordable housing that the Imperial West will deliver as one of the 'community benefits' of the scheme.

The College used to be more open in publishing reports to its Council meetings, along with fairly full minutes. This practice was changed in mid 2013, seemingly on the basis of a discussion at the Council about the need for the College to move into a phase of 'significant entrepreneurial activity'.

While we appreciate the need for all higher education bodies to explore new sources of income, we continue to argue that a greater level of openness and transparency is needed from the College in relation to the financing of Imperial West. **All that local residents want to know is how two major financial contributions (£35m from HEFCE and the £40m bequest from Michael Uren) are being factored into the development, and what effect this has had on its overall financial viability?**

Your colleagues will no doubt tell you that the issues raised in this letter are nothing new, and that both the StQW Neighbourhood Forum and the St Helens Residents Association are going over old ground. We ask you, as the College's new President and guardian of its reputation, to at least give these matters your personal consideration. We are 360 residents of the Royal Borough, within which the College has had a long and proud history, and we wish this to remain the case.

Yours sincerely,

Henry Peterson OBE
Chair of St Quintin and Woodlands Neighbourhood Forum
0207 460 1743
www.stqw.org



Visualisation of Imperial West Phase 2, when complete, as it will be seen from the Oxford Gardens Conservation Area