

Kings Cross Development Forum

Annual review September 2008-August 2009

Withdrawal of support by Camden

Following a series of meetings in which the Council offered less each time, Camden entirely withdrew administrative support, upon which the constituent organizations and members hitherto depended for the Forum to operate.

At the request of Forum members who met on 18 September 2008 the Chair wrote to the Leader and the Chief Executive of London Borough of Camden, with copies to all Camden councillors.

Low attendance and lack of support

The view was expressed that the low attendance at Forum meetings reflects Camden's decision to withdraw their support, and that a lot of people have lost confidence in the ability of the Forum to continue without resources and support.

We are out of order

We have, in fact, not held any Forum meeting in the course of the year under review at which a Quorum (15 members including the chair and vice chair) has been present and we have therefore not been able to pass amendments to the terms of reference which would have reduced the Forum requirement and dealt with other significant matters. It has also not been possible to hold valid elections, nor has any nomination been forthcoming for the proposed post of honorary secretary, nor for Vice Chair.

Our comments ignored

The existing Chair and some members of the Co-ordinating Group have endeavoured to keep the Forum's business going through the year. The Planning Response Team generated comments applications 2008/3713/P on the southern area public realm, 2008/5052/P (Block R) the 'Sainsbury' building and 2009/0415/P (Block T1) the Westernmost building on the entire Kings Cross Central site comprising combined-heat-and-power plant, housing, car parking, retail and sports hall. Regrettably, the comments were dismissed by planners and ignored by Camden's Development Control Committee. Forum members have to ask whether it is worth the effort of submitting considered comments when they are treated in this way. The Forum acknowledges the readiness of planning officers, Argent's staff and architects to expound these applications to Forum members before consideration (and sometimes before submission). However, points we made which we considered valid

- Unimaginative approach to public realm
- Failure to provide adequate footway (pavement) South of the Sainsbury building
- Noise issues for Block T1

- Several other details

were not treated with the seriousness they deserved.

Consultation and failure of communication

The Forum is consulted formally by letter to the Chair on some applications within the Kings Cross Central site by both Camden and Islington but the many other applications submitted to Camden are now not being forwarded to him through the supposedly automatic planning alert system due to some unresolved computer problem.

Deaths of valued members

At the September 2008 meeting members kept silence in memory of Lisa Pontecorvo and at the February 2009 meeting in memory of Phil Jeffries. These two valiant campaigners for the public good are sorely missed.

Pedestrian Bridge needed

The Forum has been made aware of the refusal, as yet, to provide a pedestrian bridge into King's Cross Central from the East through the refusal by Network Rail to facilitate it and the use by Camden of an irrelevant and misleading assessment report. Many Forum members have supported the campaign for a pedestrian or pedestrian/cycle bridge from York Way in the vicinity of Wharfdale Road.

Web site

The Forum's greatest success in the past year has been the establishment of the Forum web site kxdf.wordpress.com. Comment on planning applications and news of developments in Kings Cross Central have been put on-line for Forum members and others. The number of 'hits' on the website far outnumbers the attendances at Forum meetings. Thanks are due to Sophie Talbot for maintaining this significant link.

Authority to speak

An issue for the Forum arises from discussion in one of our meetings. Some came away from discussion at Forum meeting in February 2008 believing we had decided that no further responses would be made to Boroughs on any planning applications. The role of the Planning Response Team would, on this interpretation, only be to prepare model responses which member organizations could forward to the planning authority with any modifications they chose. Others feel that it is still the role of Planning Response Team to make their draft response known to the membership but also to send it to the Borough concerned unless member bodies have responded to Forum officials dissenting from the draft response. Kings Cross Development Forum is being listed as a Consultee in respect of certain applications and Councillors have been heard to enquire whether a response has been received from us and what.

Implementation Panels

Representation has been maintained on the Construction Impact Group and the Access Forum, though opportunities to report to membership have not been fully taken up. There was one omission, to attend the Design Panel, and we await notice of a further meeting – and appointment of a second Forum representative to both the Construction Impact Group and the Design Panel. Quarterly monitoring reports and constructions newsletters have been publicized via our website, keeping the interested informed on progress.

Questions demanding answers

The vital questions for the Forum are

- Shall we continue attempting to hold Forum meetings?
- Can we conform to our constitution (Terms of Reference)?
- Will anyone accept responsibility for admin?
- Will someone pursue funding possibilities for admin?
- Is it worth continuing to prepare Responses to planning applications and, if so, who should be added to the planning response team?
- May those responses be submitted on behalf of the Forum?
- What nominations will be made for officers and Co-ordinating Group members at our coming annual election?

All might be summed up in one question – is the local community bothered about what is going to happen on Kings Cross Central?

People required

Someone asked me what sort of skills/capabilities you are looking for; and more importantly perhaps my thoughts for the Forum going forward. That made me think positively and I think it's worth sharing the thoughts I was forced to ponder:

1. Monday should help us adjust our view of the prospects in this very different economic climate for construction, business and the property market.

2. We have always combined in the Forum many different local concerns: need for affordable housing – love for the old industrial heritage – concern for low carbon footprint in all aspects of planning – unique water feature of the Regent's Canal – hopes for regeneration – wish for excellent design and landscaping – permeability for access from adjacent communities – access for disabled, cyclists, walkers, pram/buggy pushers – provision for community life and young people – haven for wildlife, trees, grass etc – anxiety about harsh tower-block planning – impact on neighbouring streets especially across York Way. Even that list may not cover all the aspects Forum members are interested in.

3. Planning response team: New planning applications come along at frequent intervals; the more significant ones are looked at by our planning response team which needs additional members who will be willing at short notice to look at application plans on paper at the Town Hall extension 5th floor or, more likely online to assess them and propose Forum responses.
4. Panels: A few members represent us on implementation panels: Design, Construction Impact and Access. You don't have to be professionally qualified to be on the planning response team or on a panel but you have to take an intelligent interest and be prepared to listen and study the subject.
5. We need to extend the membership of Forum to other significant groups of people in the surrounding area and recruit them as organisations or individuals.
6. At a time of probable deep cuts in public expenditure we can't expect the planning department to give us stuff on a plate: we are going to have to root and search for it.
7. We need an honorary secretary who will do the admin of maintaining the membership list and communicating with members.
8. We need a vice-chair who will share the tasks with me or a successor.
9. We need members of co-ordinating group who will meet twice as often as the Forum (old pattern was 6 Forum meetings a year and 6 co-ordinating groups a year – probably too many but we should manage three of each per year).
10. We need someone who will work on funding – following up suggestions or having ideas of their own of who we might tap for enough money to run an admin and get in expertise when we need it.
11. We also need one or more 'missionaries' who will build up the membership and contacts North (Camden Town, Camden Square and Maiden Lane), South (Kings Cross and Bloomsbury wards of Camden), East (roads near Copenhagen Street, Wharfdale Road and Caledonian Road) and West (Somers Town northwards) in fact on all sides of the designated area.
12. And probably we need imagination which will push out the boundaries of what we are doing in ways I can't conceive because I am only one.