King’s Cross Development Forum

Annual review November 2014-November 2015

Area activity

The area this year has seen a flurry of development plans being drafted: at least seven have being developed to, or almost to, the stage of being planning applications. The primary school has opened, to await the intake from Plimsoll Building and Tapestry Building. Different meetings of the Forum have covered varied topics and have attracted diverse audiences.

Meetings

The Forum met five times in the year. It heard presentations about:

- Building R1.
- Coal Drops Yard.
- The bridge from Camley Street through the Natural Park to the Fish and Coal Buildings.

These are discussed in the remarks below about planning applications and building designs.

The Forum also heard from:

- The travel plan co-ordinator for the King’s Cross Central area about the intentions to encourage walking and cycling.
- A senior planning officer from Camden Council on the discussions with TfL about bus routes.
- Argent and Councillor Siân Berry on the revised provision for affordable and social housing in the King’s Cross Central area.

The Steering Group met four times in the year and transacted business by email between its meetings.

Planning applications

The Forum opted not to respond to the planning applications related to the buildings presented in its meetings, though the proposal for Building R1 had been criticised by Forum members at the Design Panel and Access Forum, and the proposal for Coal Drops Yard incorporated an extraordinary roof above the nineteenth century industrial buildings in order to accommodate a department store. The bridge from Camley Street to the Fish and Coal Buildings was generally welcomed, as being an elegant and effective design, free from showing-off and unnecessary flourishes.

Building designs

Camden Council organises a Design Panel and an Access Forum to review plans for the King’s Cross Central area before submission as planning applications. These bodies now hold joint meetings. Unfortunately these meetings are held during the working day, which limits who can attend regularly or even ever; nonetheless John Chamberlain, Del Brenner, Helia Evans, Malcolm Tucker and Robert Milne attended all of them collectively and most of them individually. The notes from the meetings of
the Design Panel and Access Forum appear rather rarely, and the plans circulated for those meetings are not published (so that in principle the architects can have second thoughts before publication). The plans looked at this year included those for:

- Building R1.
- Coal Drops Yard.
- The bridge from Camley Street through the Natural Park to the Fish and Coal Buildings.
- Building R8.
- Building R3.
- Building T2.
- Zone W.

Building R1, at a corner of Cubitt Park next to Cubitt Square, is an academic building on a site not originally zoned for academic use. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) selected Maki Associates to the first building by this well-known practice in the UK. The building has features to commend it, such as the set back of the building line from the footway and the pocket gardens at various levels. Further details of it are in the minutes of the meeting of the Forum in March. However, in comments during and after the Design Panel and Access Forum meeting, representatives of the Forum remarked that:

- The penthouse at the south-west corner of the top storey had a very uncomfortable appearance. With its sloped sides and straight top, it would remind many Londoners of a clumsily executed mansard roof extension. The angles of the sides and the crooked slope of the top did not connect with other features in the building, nor did they have good proportions in themselves. The architect seemed to say that the special light-reflective materials of the cladding would cause it to blend into the sky and so be seen less prominently, but that would surely apply only in certain light conditions.

- A roughly rectangular horizontal single mass that had these proportions relative to those of the building and that was placed on top of the building but that was not a development of the architectural forms below (by contrast with a traditional penthouse), would look like a hat that was too small for the head. The architect drew an analogy with a crown (and claimed St Paul’s Cathedral as a forerunner), but a crown should fit comfortably on the head. The placing of this shape of hat so much off centre would draw further attention to the south-west corner, defining the character of the building both close at hand and from a distance (as, indeed, this building is intended as a ‘flagship’) and would affect many views. So the ugly shape would be a particularly serious problem for the public perception of the The King’s Cross Central area development as a whole.

- The vertical slot in the western elevation seemed functionally rather narrow for a light well and very awkwardly placed off-centre. It would produce considerable contrasts of light and dark which might look better nearer the corner of the building.

- The articulation of the facade was strange, with particularly broad panels of solid wall on the inner edges and very narrow mullions at the outward corners.
From what he said, the architect appeared to be rather unfamiliar with London, so he might not have appreciated the relevance of these remarks. Certainly no attention appeared to have been paid to them: the building as presented later to the Forum had not changed.

Coal Drops Yard is intended to provide something complementary to other local retail areas, such as Camden Market and Covent Garden. Most of the units might be suited to the smaller independent shops, but the plans also included an extraordinary insertion to support a new large store such as a department store. This would occupy an extra floor under a curvilinear roof “taking off” from what would be left of the original roof line and straddling the gap between the east side and the west side, rather as a motorway service straddles both carriage ways. It would also serve to mark out the site, though the need for doing that is unclear: Covent Garden does not need such a structure (and St Paul’s Church does not serve that function there).

The buildings of Coal Drops Yard could be left to speak for themselves, without design fancies. Indeed, the architects hoped to preserve signs of the varied occupation of the location, successively as the coal transfer point between trains and carts, as warehouses and as light industrial premises. In addition they planned to keep the original cobbles in one bay, though the cobbles in the yard would be replaced by flat stone to make the yard accessible. Malcolm Tucker pointed out that much more could be done to expose the original functions of the buildings. After the meeting he met the Argent and the architects to describe various possibilities for making the original functions of the viaducts and coal drops clear to the public. Further points about the design are in the minutes of the meeting of the Forum in July.

The bridge from Camley Street through the Natural Park to the Fish and Coal Buildings was appreciated by the Design Panel and Access Forum. It made no claim to be an icon, a flagship or a gateway despite its position at an entry to The King’s Cross Central area. It was simply well mannered and well conceived in its attempt to solve the technical, regulatory and environmental problems associated with the limited permitted gradient, the occupancy of Camley Street Natural Park and the security of St Pancras Cruising Club. A description of some of its design features is in the minutes of the meeting of the Forum in September. There could remain a need for co-ordination with the plans relating to 101 Camley and 103 Camley Street, which have footings for bridging the canal.

Building R8, in the northern half of The King’s Cross Central area, is to contain market and affordable housing, small business space, voluntary sector space and commercial office space. The presentation to the Design Panel and Access Forum drew attention to the courtyard between the two blocks and the aim of making the block feel rather like a warehouse. The result was a dense repetitive packing of cells arranged vertically and horizontally in a concrete grid; one comment likened it to an array of battery hen cages. There was a need to articulate the vertical form, as well as horizontal one, in order to show that buildings have a top, middle and bottom. The courtyard deep between the blocks was more like a lane; it seemed uninviting, and there was no other obvious place for just encountering other occupants. The lifetime homes scheme used internal partitioning that could be rearranged as required, but some of the layouts might be rather boxy and constrained. Altogether what was presented seemed more appropriate to offices than to housing.

Building R3 adjoins Building R1 (the academic block for AKDN, to its south) and the southernmost block of Building R5 (a housing block not yet available, to its north) on Cubitt Park and backs on to an extensive garden, at the other side of which is one of the blocks of Building R8. In planning it the architects have paid some attention to its neighbours; in this they are almost alone in doing what the Forum has been requesting for some years. Building R3 itself has two blocks, intended to scale down
from Building R1. The accommodation comprises apartments, most of which have one or two bedrooms but some have three bedrooms on two storeys. Several are arranged to have views both towards Cubitt Park and towards the gardens behind Building R3 (and, less appealingly, towards Building R8); some of them have two storeys. Decorative metalwork screens shared the sun in the apartments and partition the reception areas. The gardens have a vaguely oriental derivation, with a central water channel, a carpet of rectangular beds, and a pavilion framework. Though the two blocks have rather clumsy rectangular surrounds to the rows of apartments on every other floor, the general effect makes Building R8 look cheap by comparison.

Building T2 is a large office complex that stretches around the curve of Canal Reach between Building T1 (the Tapestry Building) and Building T5 (the student accommodation for AKDN) and backs on to the cooling pod and the HighSpeed1 tracks. It has four segments of as yet uncertain size individually: bays can be “moved” between them to adjust their sizes and accommodate the wishes of prospective tenants before they are built. The four segments have the same language as each other, but variation is introduced at street level, with changes in the footpath width, treatment and paving and five pocket spaces such as spill-out areas for cafés (and, perhaps less plausibly on a street carrying cars and lorries passed office blocks, play areas for children and reading areas for adults).

Zone W covers the triangle of land that is mainly in Islington; the boundary between Camden and Islington runs along the line taken by York Way until it was realigned to go under the HighSpeed1 tracks. The proposal as seen by the Design Panel and Access Forum tries to brick up the blocks by having varying vertical edges in individual blocks and variegated dark brickwork (supposedly to match the prevalent colour of London bricks, though they are not naturally that colour and most have been cleaned or never had that colour). Unfortunately it tries too hard. The result is a confusing mess, described as “horrible” at the Design Panel and Access Forum. Some of the architects seemed to have doubts about the profiles and finishes of the blocks, and the proposal might be improved.

**Construction impact**

Camden Council holds four Construction Impact Group meetings each year to monitor the King’s Cross Central area development and the construction impact on the local environment. Attendees are from Argent (and the contractors involved in the development), Network Rail, Camden Regulatory Services, Camden Environmental Health, Transport for London, a Maiden Lane Resident and King’s Cross Development Forum representatives, who are Deklan Kilfeather and Jim Humphris.

As well as being briefed on the construction progress with each building and public realm areas the Group receives quarterly noise and air quality reports highlighting any threshold breaches, the circumstances for the breach and the remedial actions taken. Similarly complaints from the public and any consequential actions are reported. For instance, this year there have been complaints about lorries not being washed properly before leaving the site.

Construction progress is documented [here](#).

**Housing provision**

During the year there were meetings with Robert Evans and David Partridge of Argent and Councillor Siân Berry of the Green Party about the changes to the provision for social housing in the King’s Cross Central area; Councillor Phil Jones, the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Transport and Planning at Camden Council, was invited to attend the Forum meetings in June and September but was unable do so.
As background:

- The section 106 agreement for the King’s Cross Central area provided for 500 units of social rented housing and 250 units of intermediate housing.
- As of autumn 2015, 352 units of the social rented housing were finished or onsite and 98 units of the intermediate housing were finished or onsite.
- The 300 units outstanding will be reduced to 187 under a “New Deal” between Camden Council and Argent through the “Cascade Mechanism” in the 2006 section 106 agreement.
- The decision was not taken to the Camden Cabinet but was instead dealt with via the “Council Members Briefing Panel” due to it being a “non-material” change and of “no public interest”.

The Forum welcomed the fact that Robert Evans of Argent attended its meeting in September to give a frank explanation of why this reduction in social housing was agreed between Argent and Camden. In brief, the sums available to housing associations have been cut drastically by the government, the costs to Argent of development have risen, and extra money made available by replacing some of the planned social and affordable housing by open market housing (at ever-rising prices) will help to subsidies the remainder. For instance, the “New Deal” dispenses with key worker rented studios and home buy units but protects the outstanding units of social rented family homes (52 with three bedrooms and 12 with four bedrooms), which form the highest priority for Camden Council. A fuller account is in the minutes of the meeting for September.

Siân Berry took legal advice about challenging the decision made by Camden, on the grounds that the change was a material change of public interest and that the “New Deal” was simply not a good deal, as indicated in the minutes of the meeting for June. Sian was frustrated by the lack of information provided by Camden Council and ultimately made no legal challenge.

**Transport provision**

Charlotte May, the King’s Cross Travel Plan Coordinator, started work in November 2014. She promotes sustainable transport to, from and across The King’s Cross Central area and supports occupants of the site in developing their own sustainable travel initiatives as part of the area-wide travel plan. She spoke to the Forum in March and has now provided for the Forum the following update on her activities:

- A monitoring report was commissioned in November 2014 to check progress towards sustainable travel targets. Travel mode share varies according to land use, but surveys of staff and residents showed very high levels of sustainable travel to the site, including walking and cycling; for instance, 16% of all employees travel to work by bike (while the London average is 2.5%). In summer 2015, Argent won the property industry’s Most Cycle Friendly Developer Award, and was shortlisted for the transport sector’s Most Cycle Friendly Workplace.

- Various green travel and road safety events have been held during the year. They include a Walkers’ Breakfast, an HGV/Cyclist Exchanging Places event and twelve Dr Bike clinics. The clinics provide free bike check-ups and basic repairs to all who live, walk and study in the area. They are intended to be held regularly throughout 2016.
A major change in the area has been the reallocation of road space better to protect cyclists. This is welcome following the fatality of a 25 year old female student, but regrettably some of the additional road space has been taken from pedestrians at the south-west corner of Grays Inn Road. The benefit for the public realm of providing better circulation space for pedestrians can be seen in front of King's Cross Station, which so far has avoided the clutter now associated with Euston Station.

We have not yet been successful in persuading TfL to adopt some modest changes to bus routes through the area. We suggested that all routes terminating at King's Cross Station could be routed through The King’s Cross Central area, and that two routes which terminate nearby could be extended towards them. So far, only the 45 and 63 have been partially modified. At the Forum meeting in March Rob Willis, a Camden Senior Planning Officer, outlined his discussions with TfL about the bus routes. He has now reported that there has been no further progress since then: TfL are now looking at improvements to the gyratory, and detailed decisions about the use of Goods Way and the Boulevard need to be considered in that wider context. Only in the first quarter of 2016 will the picture start to be clarified.

During this year the plans for CrossRail2 have assumed a new urgency. In the current round of consultation on the plans, which runs until 8 January 2016, two formal meetings have been chaired by Councillor Phil Jones, the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Transport and Planning at Camden Council. Andrew Bosi and Deklan Kilfeather have been involved on behalf of the Forum. They comment that:

- The original scheme, with stations at Essex Road, King's Cross and Tottenham Court Road, was similar in scale to the original Victoria line plans which were cut back fifty years ago. It was designed to relieve congestion on existing lines and to provide useful new interchange facilities; these would have created short cuts, so that many journeys would become quicker and impose less intense strain on the network.

- The scheme has grown in scope as TfL now perceives it as essential to dispersing HighSpeed2 passengers from Euston (in itself a controversial plan). The stations around the area now planned are Angel, Euston-St. Pancras and Tottenham Court Road. The link between HighSpeed1 and HighSpeed2, which was the only reason for bringing HighSpeed2 to Euston, has been dropped; people will be encouraged to walk to make the connection. The CrossRail2 team does not see that many people would choose to walk from one end of its station platform to the other; making this possible would provide step-free access for those with heavy luggage and shelter from the rain for all. Worse, the CrossRail2 team believes that yet another council estate must be demolished to position the station best.

**Health care provision**

Argent had obligations under the Section 106 agreement for health care provision to provide floor space of up to 1,250 square metres for a health centre and 750 square metres for a walk-in centre. Camden and Islington Public Health recommended various options to NHS England for consideration and decision; these are summarised in the minutes of the meeting of the Forum in April 2014. Ian Sandford, the Camden and Islington Public Health Strategist, has kindly provided for the Forum the following summary of the situation as it now is:
After the negotiations leading to the Section 106 agreement, which occurred over ten years ago, national policy towards walk-in centres changed: they are no longer seen as a key component of local primary and urgent care services. On the advice of the former Camden Primary Care Trust, the agreement for the 750 square metres was relinquished.

Camden and Islington Public Health has been working with partners, including Camden Clinical Commissioning Group and NHS England (London), on various issues affecting primary care premises in Camden. In this work, one of the options recommended to NHS England, which is responsible for approving premises developments, was to relocate an existing general practitioner practice to The King’s Cross Central area.

In November 2015, the head leaseholder of the premises occupied on King’s Cross Road by the then King’s Cross Road Practice relinquished the lease, so the practice moved to St Pancras Hospital as an interim measure.

NHS England (London) has developed a business case to move the practice to St Pancras Hospital, pending a formal decision to approve relocation to a floor space of 700 square metres in The King’s Cross Central area. It has also appointed a project manager to develop the business case to support the long term relocation to The King’s Cross Central area.

Camden Clinical Commissioning Group has now established a Strategic Estates Group which will be developing a Strategic Estates Plan for the borough that will include supporting the delivery of general practitioner services. The business case will be submitted for inclusion in the Strategic Estates Plan, which, for the King’s Cross Practice, then needs to be submitted to the Department of Health by the end of December 2015.

Assuming its inclusion in the Strategic Estates Plan, the business case can be considered in February 2016 by the Finance, Investment, Procurement and Audit Committee of NHS England, which is responsible for approving premises investments on this scale. Subject to approval by NHS England, the earliest envisaged completion and opening of a general practitioner practice in The King’s Cross Central area would be between July and September 2018.

Camden Clinical Commissioning Group and NHS England will also implement an engagement plan with local people and stakeholders about the plans set out in the business case and included in the Strategic Estates Plan.

Officers from Camden Council made extensive investigations to identify potential health or social care uses for the floor space at The King’s Cross Central area. In the absence of suitable alternative uses, it has been agreed that the floor space not required for the practice will be released and its value will be transferred to deliver community benefits elsewhere on the site.

**Funds**

The Forum continues to hold £1000 in funding from Community Action, the charity associated with One Housing Group. The funding is to defray costs on the basis that the Forum is concerned to integrate and represent, as far as possible, the users and occupants of both the King’s Cross Central area and its periphery.
Communications

Visitors from the Greater London Authority asked to be guided round parts of the development and to be told the views of the members of the Forum.

The Forum was also asked about how it operated and what assistance it received from Camden Council. That enquiry came from a local authority which is seeking to ensure community involvement in the development of its large historic local railway lands (which straddle ward boundaries but not borough boundaries). It was impressed to hear that volunteers did all the work, without assistance from Camden Council.

Web site

The Forum web site has copies of the submissions made on behalf of the Forum and pointers to relevant external documents. Members of the Forum are urged to subscribe to receive automatically information about updates to the web site, especially as documents such as planning applications are too large to be sent in mass email. Subscribing is free and simply entails providing an email address under the heading “Future posts” at the web site. Updates occur every few weeks.

Members are also encouraged to subscribe to the King’s Cross Local Environment web site. This is concerned with more short term matters than the Forum web site and covers a wider range of topics, so updates occur every few days.

The coming year

With greater occupancy of the King's Cross Central area the Forum is intended to become a site occupants association that would put forward the views of people living or working in the area. In this role it would complement the residents associations dealing with the managers of particular buildings (such as One Housing Group, in the case of Saxon Court and Rubicon Court).

Of course while the area is still under development, the interests of the occupants will to some extent be considered in the marketing efforts of the developers. The intention and value of the Forum should be kept under review. In the mean time the Forum should ensure that it engages properly with the occupants of the housing and offices now becoming available.

Acknowledgements

The Forum is grateful to the outside speakers from the architects and developers who have attended meetings of the Forum to explain their plans.

The Forum is grateful to Camden Council for providing meeting rooms without charge.

Elections

Nominations are sought for members of the Steering Group to be elected at the annual review meeting on 9 December 2015.

Appointees (at review date)

- Chair: Ben Williams
- Joint Deputy Chairs: Deklan Kilfeather and Lisa Tang
• Secretary: Robert Milne

• Treasurer: Jim Humphris

• Other Steering Group members: Del Brenner, Debbie Edwards, Ernie Lew, Jasmine King, Norman Sheppard and Malcolm Tucker

• Representatives on implementation panels:
  o Access Forum: John Chamberlain, Helia Evans.
  o Design Panel: Robert Milne, Malcolm Tucker.
  o Construction Impact Group: Deklan Kilfeather, Jim Humphris.