**From:** Tom Simon (Cllr)
**Sent:** 13 April 2023 11:54
**To:** pcu@levellingup.gov.uk <pcu@levellingup.gov.uk>
**Subject:** REF: PCU/RTI/X5210/3308723 O2 planning application

To The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP,

I am a councillor for Belsize ward in the London Borough of Camden, which is affected by an important planning decision just made by Camden Council. I am also the Leader of the Opposition on Camden Council.

I am writing to ask you to review this conditional decision, which blatantly disregards your aspirations to build “beautiful communities” in London and that defies your wish to avoid housing developments of “indifferent or insipid urban character”, as you informed BBC4 listeners and readers of “A School of Place.”

Camden has just approved Landsec’s plan to build 21 closely-packed tower blocks in West Hampstead between four conservation areas in a neighbourhood of historical character. The scheme, on the O2 Centre site, breaches many design and land use rules, including the London Plan. If this intolerable scheme goes ahead, every other London council is going to feel free to likewise throw up housing “at any cost.”

Please call in this application, as Camden Council has ignored all of over 1,000 written objections from residents, and done little to ensure the water, sewage, and transport systems will support the expected 5,000 new residents. Nor has Camden listened to concerns from independent financial assessor BPS Chartered Surveyors about whether the scheme, which is £200 million in deficit, will ever be completed and include the promised social housing, green spaces, and health centre.

The plan defies the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which aims to ensure “developments are beautiful, green and accompanied by new infrastructure and affordable housing”. It also breaches the Bill’s aims to protect our heritage, foster better environmental outcomes, and allow neighbours to shape their surroundings.

I understand that the following are some of the criteria for calling in an application, with details of how each applies in this case.

1. **May conflict with national policies on important matters; London Plan**

The Landsec scheme defies the National Planning Policy Framework, Section 12, which says:

“All guides and codes should be based on effective community engagement and reflect local aspirations for the development of their area, taking into account the guidance contained in the National Design Guide and the National Model Design Code.”

Camden and Landsec collected local opinion, but then ignored every objection and addressed them in only the most cursory way in Camden’s 700-page report to the Planning Committee. Serious concerns by the police, Thames Water, and flood and transport experts were largely glossed over. Nearly 300 pages, including a damning independent planning consultant’s report on the design commission by local groups, came to the committee just one day before the meeting.

The scheme ignores London Plan policy D9, which instructs councils to partner locals and tailor developments to each town centre. It transgresses the density requirements of London Plan SRQ (2x denser). It flouts the National Model Design Code, as it verges on hyper-density in an outer suburb (3-5x denser), and it breaches the Fortune Green and West Hampstead Neighbourhood Plan. It also breaches Camden’s own rules on green space and affordable housing. Camden is accepting payments from Landsec as compensation for them not complying with Camden’s public open space and carbon net zero requirements.

**2. Could have significant effects beyond their immediate locality**

Camden is setting an alarming precedent of ignoring national guidelines, breaching its own plans, and dismissing local opinion. It has ploughed ahead heedlessly to allow Landsec to build Soviet-style tower blocks in an area of Victorian and Edwardian beauty—an area which lacks the water, services, and transport to support 5,000 new residents.

If this plan proceeds, councils around London will use it as a precedent for similar flouting of regulations and public opinion. London will become a mishmash of unplanned tower blocks and an unwelcoming and unhappy city, with rare areas of residential beauty left.

**3. Raise significant architectural and urban design issues.**

Twelve community groups hired an independent planning consultant to assess the Landsec scheme. The planner’s conclusion was the “application is fundamentally and fatally flawed”. (His report is in Camden’s supplementary report.) The planner found Landsec’s proposal fails to meet the Camden Plan for a “design-led” solution of “the highest quality”, due to:

a) Excessive and unnecessary height

b) Excessive and unnecessary density

c) Insufficient and poorly utilised usable green space

d) The unnecessary and environmentally damaging demolition of the O2 Centre, to the detriment of future residents, neighbours, and the Climate Emergency.

Landsec may well send you pictures of green spaces, light buildings, and smiling children. None of these shows the enormous height or the packed nature of the buildings (Some are only 14 metres apart). Nor do they show the wind tunnels, dark corridors, or isolating nature of these tower homes.

I know that many of the residents I represent share your vision of a better future for London’s housing. Please call in the application.

Best regards

Cllr Tom Simon

Belsize Ward

Liberal Democrats

Leader of the Opposition, Camden Council