Evidence to Public inquiry into land formerly known as British Gas Works

I would like to thank the inquiry for allowing me to state my objections to the current proposal for developing Victoria Quarter or the Gasworks scheme as it is known locally. I should say that I am not a planning expert and I comment in my capacity as an elected member of Barnet Council and a representative of the views of residents, particularly in the New Barnet area around the site, insofar as I receive them on the doorstep, at meetings and in emails.

I was elected as a Labour councillor for East Barnet ward in 2014, together with colleagues Laurie Williams and Rebecca Challice. I served in that capacity until 2018 when I narrowly lost my seat. I was elected again as an East Barnet councillor in May 2022 for a four-year term.

It was clear from early on in 2014-15 when talking to local residents and those who had campaigned on this issue that the Gasworks was an important development that would impact everyone in the surrounding area. One factor that emerged was potential traffic congestion as result of the development, and I had also taken up the issue of dangerously speeding cars down Victoria Road adjacent to the site. I worked with residents on a successful campaign for a 20mph limit with warning lights on that road, and also for a pedestrian crossing at the northern end of Victoria Road close to East Barnet Road to allow schoolchildren and others to cross safely from Victoria Recreation Ground. That was delayed due to the Gasworks controversy and only installed this year ie early 2022.

I should emphasise that in that period, no local person or resident was opposed to housing on the Gasworks site. In no way are they NIMBYS, on the contrary they saw the need for housing especially family homes and were only interested on what it might mean for local infrastructure, for instance what pressure it would bring to GP and health services, and to schools, both already fully stretched. Cllr Williams and I had a number of briefing meetings in that 2015-16 period with One Housing who were leading the development, and it seemed to us that there was considerable merit in the plan for 371 decent quality homes, a mix of housing and flats, including 30 per cent three and four bed family homes which we knew were desperately needed, and were indeed a housing priority for Barnet.

We believed this had the support of the local community as well as council planning officers and was in fact cross party as I seem to recall that the Conservatives were backing it also. Once the council gave planning consent in 2017 remediation work was ongoing and we as councillors thought that as long as work progressed in a reasonable fashion the scheme could be up and running in a few years time. Indeed had that happened the site could have been occupied by now. The turn of events in which another developer Fairview has taken over and produced a revised scheme has been a setback for the community and not in its best interests.

From my contact with residents there appears to have been very little local consultation on the part of Fairview for their plan for first 652 flats in high density tower blocks, then a modified version of the same scheme with 539 flats, both of which have been unanimously refused by the council’s Planning Committee. It is hard to see why Barnet officers would approve of a plan which is very similar to the one only recently rejected. There is a lack of consistency here which should be noted. In particular these proposals do not seriously address the noise problems that will be experienced by residents facing the East Coast Main Line; the high rise nature of the Fairview plan which contrasts markedly with the low rise residential housing of the New Barnet area;

the risk of overheating in many of the blocks leading to expensive cooling systems needing to be installed; and the previous criticism of a lack of family housing or enough three to four bedroom accommodation in line with Barnet current housing policies.

It seems to me that any new scheme must deal with these objections. That involves meaningful consultation with local residents, who mostly support the campaigners, to take these arguments on board and if necessary come to a consensus on the best way forward. The inquiry would be performing a public service if it made that recommendation.

Lastly, as the chair of Barnet’s Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, I am well aware of the current strain on GP services. Fairview appear to have seriously under-stated the pressure that well over a thousand new residents will have on GP and primary care. In a cursory note on health impact they claim that the ratio of doctors to patients in local practices is below the benchmark, and they can easily accept the residents from the site.

This ignores increasing evidence of a crisis in provision. The recent Commons Health and Care Select Committee has just reported that the number of full-time equivalent GPs fell by more than 700 over three years to March 2022, despite a pledge to deliver 6,000 more. Appearing before the inquiry, the then Secretary of State Sajid Javid admitted he was not on track to deliver them

The British Medical Association has found that despite there being 1,608 fewer fully qualified full-time equivalent GPs today than there were in 2015, each practice has on average 2,222 more patients than they did then. GPs are continuing to provide [over a million appointments per day](https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/appointments-in-general-practice/march-2021), with the great majority face-to-face, and with [increasing consultation rates per patient](https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/11/12/e054666). Fewer GPs providing care for more patients increases the risk of harm and suboptimal care through decision fatigue, as well as risking harm to the GP through burnout, and psychological injury.

One can add to this the mental and physical health impact of Victoria Quarter residents forced to live in noisy, overheated flats with minimum space requirements. The human impact of these plans should be taken on board in my view.

Thankyou for providing space for my comments.

Cllr Dr Philip Cohen

East Barnet