

Appendix C – Public Exhibition Response Summary

26th May 2016

Huguenot House and the wider site Summary of public exhibition questionnaire responses

In February 2016, Westminster City Council (WCC) held two public exhibitions to share the findings of initial study work that has been undertaken into the potential options for the future of Huguenot House and the wider commercial uses below.

At the events on 17th and 24th February 2016, residents, leaseholders and local stakeholders were given the opportunity to examine four possible options for the site. These options are currently available to view online at www.westminster.gov.uk/huguenot-house.

Questionnaires were also made available at each event to enable all attendees to submit their views and comments on the four possible options, the likely impact on those who live and work in the area and a preferred method of communication with WCC moving forward.

A total of 17 responses were received. Of the responses received, 12 were from residents/lessees, three from adjoining businesses / owners / developers, one from a non-resident leaseholder and one from a regular visitor and worker to the area.

From the feedback, there was a clear split in opinion between residents / lessees and non-residents leaseholder and the developers / adjoining owners. To reflect this, the responses have been grouped separately.

In addition, a petition signed by 23 Huguenot House residents was also received. This is included as Appendix 1.

A full analysis of the feedback received is summarised in the following report.

Responses in summary

Question 1. About Huguenot House and the wider site, including its vicinity and local environment.

A. What are the positive things about the Huguenot House property?

Resident/lessee responses:

The views expressed highlighted that the property is very well located for transport hubs, being just off the main thoroughfare and for the area, it is relatively quiet. Some respondents felt the design of the property was perfect as it isn't overdeveloped and possesses an excellent car park that serves the public. Generally this building is viewed by some residents as an important part of history in the area and should be refurbished and retained as such.

Huguenot House residents have formed a strong cohesive community. It is positioned well for health hubs - this being particularly important for many of the elderly residents. The building comprises two lifts and a resident caretaker which adds further value to the community cohesiveness and sense of place expressed by the residents.

Non-resident leaseholder and developer responses:

This group expressed that there are 'very few redeeming features', but admitted that this view was taken from that experienced from outside the building. Generally it was felt that the aesthetic nature of the building does not contribute to the townscape.

Positive aspects included the mixed use of the building. It was noted that Huguenot House provides good uses for the locality, housing, parking and entertainment. The redevelopment of the existing building into a mixed use development would enhance its retail, office and leisure use at ground levels and it was felt that this will improve its relevance to the locality.

B. And what are the negative things?

Resident/lessee responses:

Generally the residents view is that the building has been 'allowed to be run down by Westminster' and WCC is giving in to short term profit at resident's expense. The lack of community engagement was also criticised as little acknowledgement had been given to residents who were now uncertain of where they will live in the future. The gradual blocking of the view by building upwards was also mentioned, along with the lack of fibre optic broadband, the lack of storage space for residents and a question as to why the lift only goes to the 6th floor.

Non-resident leaseholder and developer responses:

The view from this group identified the dated design of the building and the poor relationship with streets on all sides, and the dominant car park. In particular, the blank and inactive facades at ground level, the ugly car park detracts from the townscape and is out of keeping with adjacent properties.

There was an expectation of seeing more retail and open studio space on the basement, ground and first floors. There was also a view that there was bias being shown on the massing plan and questioning the need for a major car park in this location.

C. What are the positive things about the vicinity and local environment?

Resident/lessee responses:

Overall residents expressed the convenience of having a large number of public transport options for all directions and the many famous attractions nearby. Easy access for cultural events offered a strong base for community involvement.

Non-resident leaseholder and developer responses:

This group identified this area as a 'key island site linking the larger sites'. Panton Street is a strong link to Haymarket which can be improved. After being neglected for many years, the area is now being regenerated with many of the nearby buildings being redeveloped and new and exciting occupiers moving in like Dover Street Market.

Generally it was felt that Whitcomb Street, Panton Street and Orange Street will be transformed by the works being carried out by LSQ and the Edwardian Hotel and the connections between Trafalgar Square/Piccadilly Circus /Shaftesbury Avenue will be much better.

D. And what are the negative things?

Resident/lessee responses:

Antisocial behaviour (ASB), late night noise along with the gradual disappearance of interesting shops in favour of chains were a concern to most residents. It was suggested that there now 'fewer ordinary people living in the area'. Other views included that the council failed to enforce rules around ASB.

The construction sites have dark corridors of hoarding which have added to security concerns, as these areas were now where people gathered at night according to residents. The redevelopment of Leicester Square and disruptive disturbance, excessive busking and other street entertainment were to the detriment of residents and pedestrians.

Non-resident leaseholder and developer responses:

Until redevelopment takes place, there will continue to be security concerns due to lack of well-lit areas and incidents of ASB. It is bounded by streets which people avoid for safety reasons and there remain issues for local stakeholders around safety at night. Views were also expressed around the need for traffic calming through the area of Whitcomb Street and Panton Street to enhance the pedestrian experience.

Question 2. As you have seen from the information, the council is considering a range of options including the redevelopment of the site known as Huguenot House.

- A. Do you feel that you understand the reasons why the council is undertaking a study to see what options many be available?**

Resident/lessee responses:

The view from many residents is that the study was presented as if the only choice was to accept the change, and that the redevelopment is being driven from a financial perspective.

Non-resident leaseholder and developer responses:

It was highlighted that a better explanation was needed of the financial pressures on the council, and the consequent need to make more money from its property portfolio. Both groups expressed that they were pleased to see that WCC was seeking the views of residents and local stakeholders prior to making decisions on the future of this site.

- B. How do you feel about potential redevelopment of the Huguenot House site as one of the options?**

Resident/lessee responses:

The view that WCC has been running down the building was expressed again in this section, alongside current resident feeling that they would be unable to afford one of the new flats if this option was decided upon. They expressed concern about how this would cause a break up of their community. Residents with health issues have access to local health hubs and have expressed that they would be unhappy to move to a different location.

Non-resident leaseholder and developer responses:

Views expressed concluded that redevelopment was the only option and its redevelopment would serve as a catalyst for further investment in neighbouring properties, furthering investment and growth in the City. Redevelopment would also present an opportunity to properly plan traffic flows to and around the site.

Question 3. What would you like to see from the redevelopment of Huguenot House and the wider site?

Resident/lessee/non-resident leaseholder responses:

Comments from residents reinforced their views that they did not want to see the redevelopment in their lifetime and wanted the building left alone and refurbished. Residents also wanted to see more residential and more office space as part of any redevelopment rather than car parking, retail and restaurants, as did non-resident leaseholders.

Question 4. What is the likely impact for you of any redevelopment of the site, and how do you feel about this?

Resident/lessee responses:

The general view of residents is that they feel they are being pushed out of their homes so that WCC could make money from the building, and a number of respondents objected to this question – feeling that it lacked compassion. There was a view also criticising the publishing of Westminster plans on Huguenot House as it was felt this has caused the flats to become unsellable except to WCC.

Non-resident leaseholder and developer responses:

The view of this group expressed that the improvement of the locality would counter-act an apparently negative impact, saying that this part of the West End would benefit enormously by the development of Huguenot House and commercial uses below. The impact of a much improved streetscape on Whitcomb Street and Panton Street with more ‘life’ will be the real asset to central London.

Question 5. Please tell us any other ways in which you would like the council to communicate and engage with you in relation to the possible redevelopment of the site.

Resident/lessee responses:

The general consensus is that redevelopment proposals should be abandoned and not taken up for at least 15 years. Others explained that how the council communicates, is totally irrelevant - what matters is what redevelopment is planned.

There were requests for face to face meetings with residents and stakeholders. Residents felt that staff at the presentations were not decision makers and did not, or were not, able to provide clear answers to questions.

Group meetings with leaseholders and residents were requested - this way residents would be able to respond in a more collective way.

Non-resident leaseholder and developer responses:

The view was that the scheme required wider publicity. There was a suggestion that this could be a partnership approach through the Local Business Improvement District and local media. This would help to ensure that a cross section of views on potential redevelopment was gleaned. In this respect Heart of London BID should be considered for inclusion on future mailing lists. In addition regular updates from the Public Realm Advisory group at WCC relating to this would be a welcome addition.

Appendix 1

Petition

A petition signed by 23 residents was received as detailed verbatim below:

'We the residents of Huguenot House object in the strongest possible terms to any plans that would involve demolition of any part of the building.

The block that contains Huguenot House is a perfect design, built to a very high standard.

In our opinion Westminster has neglected the block for almost 20 years through supervised neglect and failed in their covenant to maintain it to a standard required for such an important building in the West End of London.

For almost 20 years the only refurbishment or decoration that has been done to the building has been to replace the damaged entrance to Huguenot House in Oxenden Street. Citywest Homes who are supposed to 'manage' the residential part of the building, refuse to do any proper maintenance to the block other than most vital repairs. This is a total disgrace and no self-respecting responsible or caring freeholder would allow such neglect to their valuable property.

In our opinion, the plans we have been shown that involves the demolition of the building and replacing it with any of the structures suggested would be an unnecessary and monstrous overdevelopment of the environment. It is nothing less than vandalism of a superbly conceived, sensitively designed and beautifully constructed building, which Westminster has allowed to deteriorate.

The proposed redevelopment project is driven by Westminster purely for financial gain. Over the last few years there has been a huge loss of off-street parking spaces in the area. Further reduction of off-street public car parking spaces, as in the car park under Huguenot House would be an unacceptable destruction of an indispensable Theatreland facility that is unique in the area.

The demolition of the site would also destroy a stable residential community. Many people in the block have lived in the building for over 40 years.

We demand Westminster drops the whole idea of demolition and plans a proper refurbishment program of the block and supports residents so they can continue to live in the building without disturbance.

A very large number of lessees will definitely not give up their homes in Huguenot House and sell them willingly to Westminster. If you want to evict all of us you will then need to resort to a Compulsory Purchase order, which we have been told by our expert advisors you will not get. It is interesting to note that you have stated in a public document that you want to avoid a Compulsory Purchase order as it would be expensive and have a potential detrimental effect on the Council's reputation.

So please stop throwing many hundreds of thousands of pounds of public money away on trying to carry on with this monstrous project which will be defeated. Your Cabinet needs to understand fully the true facts and the views of people whose lives would be thrown into turmoil.'

The Residents of Huguenot House