

DOES
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NW3 1NR

18th May 2016

Attn Mr P Lauener

EFA CEO

Dear Sir,

Downshire Hill Residents' Association (DHRA)

**Representations regarding Hampstead Police Station- EFA and
Abacus Proposals**

I am writing as a matter of urgency to seek clarification on the potential conversion of the Old Hampstead Police Station to an EFA funded 420 pupil school for Abacus Belsize Park Primary School.

First some background;-

- Residents in Belsize Park London lobbied Camden for a secular primary school of 210 pupils as none was available locally. This was agreed by Camden and the school was established in 2012 (it now has 60 pupils). The school is on a temporary site whilst a new site is sought.
- Abacus School, in a letter to all parents dated January 2015, at first rejected the Old Police Station site in Hampstead as totally unacceptable. However, out of the blue, in 2016, a School of 420 pupils was proposed at the Old Police Station.
- The site is a listed building in a location of significance and at first all residents assumed that the developers would at least take heed of its associated constraints to bring forward a scheme both of scale, community benefit and design quality that all parties could work towards. Unfortunately this has proved not to be the case and, while we believe the Planning Department of Camden Council should and will refuse planning permission based on a wide range of issues such as scale, design, heritage, congestion, noise, air pollution, appropriateness for use, and health and safety, there are four overriding questions which I thought you could help me with.

To take each of the four questions in turn;-

- 1) The first concerns **the EFA's role in the process**. Abacus school was happy with a 210 place school but have told us that the EFA have insisted on a 420 school on commercial viability grounds, despite the lack of need in the area. At the (late)

consultation meetings held with the local community, no one from the EFA was present to explain why the school was suddenly 420 places and hence the most important part of the plans were not up for debate. The contractors, and Abacus School, could not answer any questions about scale. It seemed to be a given. It seems that a 420 place school has been dumped on Abacus.

Recent press reports confirm that in [CfBT] early days the schools trust grew too quickly and took on too many schools all at once – many in areas where CST had no other local presence: “In these three schools the progress has not been rapid enough and it is in the interests of the children and young people that another trust – more local to the area – should take over responsibility for them.” Mr Tweedale CfBT CEO had previously told Schools Week the rapid expansion was down to the government’s “quantity, quantity, quantity” policy on academy sponsorship. The trust’s decision follows criticism of underperformance in two other academy trusts by Ofsted.

Could you please explain your role and why this upscaling has been hidden from the public consultation process and how you intend to redress the situation?

- 2) The second issue concerns the **process by which a landmark public building in the centre of Hampstead was allocated to CfBT**, who are working with Abacus, when some 39% of CFBT schools, are in special measures with a further 6% requiring improvement. In fact, as the CfBT Trust, which partners the Abacus Belsize Primary School, was recently roundly criticised by Ofsted for poor performance and “standards in its schools which are too low, it is very difficult to understand why, and on what criteria, the Education Funding Agency made the decision to give control of this public asset to a Trust that is, by Ofsted’s standards, performing quite poorly.

Perhaps you could clarify the process by which CfBT, such a low performing Trust, were awarded the school in a transparent and legally acceptable manner.

- 3) My third point is that we also would like to **enquire about the likely true cost of the school** which the Head of Education at Camden has calculated will cost £14m to buy the site and a further £7m to convert, taking the total cost to £50k/pupil. I think this is a record for a London Primary school and four times the national average. At the moment it is so expensive that Abacus cannot even afford the £50k to move a pedestrian crossing for the benefit of the children.

Perhaps you could let us know the justification of the cost of the proposed school.

- 4) My fourth and last point is that the police station site is over 1km uphill away from its intended catchment area, and, at its new scale of 420 pupils, will **impact the three Hampstead local secular schools** which lie within a few hundred yards of the police station. One of these schools has already objected to Camden saying it will undermine their funding to such an extent that it will threaten their viability. By the way the threatened school is rated by Ofsted as “Good”, substantially better than some CfBT schools. Camden has stated that they do not need any more primary schools until

2025+ and then not in this part of the Borough with its decreasing birth rate. In addition, with 12,000 pupils at more than 50 schools in NW3, Camden policy is that no more private or state schools are required, especially if they drag in yet more traffic. It is clear that the proposed development would damage existing schools, particularly given its proposed scale. This and the fact that the Police Station does not sit within the Abacus catchment area would also mean virtually all of its pupils would be forced to commute from Belsize Park, Kilburn, Cricklewood, Regents Park and other communities into Hampstead each day. This would of course exacerbate congestion and air pollution in an area already blighted by both. In fact, Camden explicitly states: "Camden cannot provide for unlimited choice that could compromise the viability of other schools and not be a wise use of public money." It is of great concern to local parents -- as well as to local schools, -- that a new school would "cannibalise" pupils and budget spend from existing schools in the area, damaging them and undermining their efforts and excellent work. It should also be noted that if you go into the various nearby Church schools you will see that all have a cosmopolitan mix of different minority and ethnic groups – some schools comprising over half their number, and welcome this wide range of ethnic backgrounds.

Given the damage it will do to the neighbouring secular Camden primary schools just a few hundred yards away, could you please give me the rationale for the site selection as a location for yet more primary schools in Hampstead. There are plenty of buildings in Belsize Park, not least the half empty old Hampstead Town Hall, where everyone could walk to school.

I would suggest that the above questions require time and careful consideration as, if this is allowed to proceed, it would risk a potential abuse of public assets and be severely damaging the character and amenity of the local area as well as the education of its children.

I would appreciate your rapid response to the above questions. If you have any questions or if we can be of any assistance as you consider these issues, there are a large number of local residents who will work to provide you with whatever is necessary.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Ainger
Chair of DHRA

Downshire Hill Residents' Association
Hon Treasurer M Dennis