

Loss of Offices reply from Cllr Govindia January 2014

From: Council Leader [<mailto:leaders@wandsworth.gov.uk>]

Sent: 06 January 2014 14:37

Dear Ms McMillan,

Loss of Offices in Putney

Thank you for your email of 20 December 2013 expressing your concerns about the loss of offices and jobs in Putney. Naturally the Council is concerned with the loss of office employment in Putney and its wider economic prospects. This is evidenced by the Council's Planning Policy, its comments on the Office to Residential permitted development change at the consultation stage, and its application to exempt Putney Town Centre from the changes, the latter point being acknowledged in your letter. I was deeply disappointed that the bid was unsuccessful. It is also highlighted in the work the Council undertakes on Town Centre Management and economic development.

The planning policy framework for the assessment of applications for the redevelopment of offices in Putney is provided by the Council's Core Strategy (adopted October 2010) and Development Monitoring Policies Document (adopted February 2012). Since March 2012, the national planning policy context has been provided by the National Planning Policy Framework. It is also important to note the wider picture of reducing office space demands in light of measures like homeworking, hot desking and flexible hours.

The nature of the existing office development in East Putney meant that the existing office floorspace was not attractive relative to the office market as a whole, leading to poor quality space with low rents and some blocks becoming uneconomic to let. This together with the unattractive nature of the blocks led to the need to redevelop the area being recognised as a priority in the Council Local development Framework.

Policy PL14 of the Core Strategy identified that "The redevelopment and refurbishment of existing office blocks clustered around East Putney Station and on the south side of Upper Richmond Road offer opportunities to deliver modern office floorspace, new housing including affordable housing, new retail/restaurant space and improved public realm. ..."

Whilst Policy DMTS13 in the DMPD seeks to avoid the net loss of offices in town centres, it also recognises the tension that exists in delivering all of the Council's objectives in East Putney, stating "In assessing the level of office reprovision in East Putney, account will be taken of the number of jobs being provided and the extent to which the proposal will achieve the objectives set out for this area in Core Strategy Policy PL14".

The Council's planning policies therefore recognise that in assessing applications the retention of office floorspace has to be balanced against the achievement of other objectives in the plan. This assessment is made on a case by case basis for each application. In the light of this I feel that it is incorrect to say that there has been a "total failure to apply policy" as you suggest in your letter.

Planning permissions have been granted relating to the net loss of 14,124 sq ms of B1 floorspace. If all the developments are implemented they would lead to the provision of 5,524 sq ms of new office floorspace, 2,917 sq ms of retail (A1-A5) floorspace, 358 sq ms of other floorspace and a net increase of 384 residential units. In addition, subject to the GLA approval, the development at 111 Upper Richmond Road will result in a net loss of 719 sq.m of Class B1 floor space, with a re-provision of 1,077 sq.m 127 sq.m of ground floor retail (A1-A3) and 37 residential units.

Whilst it is undoubtedly true that the development taking place will lead to a net loss of offices in Putney, the offices provided will be better placed to attract tenants and are likely to be occupied at higher densities. Whilst, in your letter, you indicate that existing office premises could be occupied at higher densities the market has clearly not delivered this. To do so considerable investment might be needed to achieve modern standards of quality, IT provision and other infrastructure and the market has shown that this would not come forward as that investment is not justified in terms of the commercial level of return compared to the benefits of redevelopment.

The proposed developments, including the provision of new office floorspace, also have to be viewed in the context of the changes to permitted development rights from offices to residential. As the vast majority of these schemes were not implemented before this change was introduced the new permitted development rights will not apply to the office floorspace created. However, under the new rights the Council would be unable to prevent the conversions of the existing offices to 100% residential use as the Council's bid to exclude Putney Town Centre from the change was unsuccessful.

I understand that the Putney Society made limited representations in relation to the Council's policies on offices in response to the Council's consultation on its review of its local plan earlier in 2013. It is intended to report the changes to the Local Plan documents to be included in the Submission Versions of the documents to the Strategic Planning and Transportation Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February, however having discussed the matter with officers who have reviewed the consultation comments it is not proposed to make any further changes in this area of policy. It will however be open to the Putney Society to raise these matters further should the Inspector undertaking the Examination of the documents raise this as an issue for discussion should they wish to.

The position in relation to the leases at Carlson Court is regrettable, but is something over which the Council has no control. As you may be aware the Council sought to include this location in its permitted development Exemption application for Putney. The grounds for seeking the applicant to make a planning application in relation to such notifications are however very limited.

The redevelopment at 111 Upper Richmond Road, as stated above included the re-provision of approximately 1,000 sq.m of Class B1 office floor space. In considering this application, the members of the Planning Applications Committee had as the fallback position for the developers, a scheme that could be achieved under the office to residential permitted development rights. This would have retained 0 sq.m office floor space (as well as missing out on a number of other benefits ranging from an active frontage, a large CIL payment and as a contribution to off site affordable housing). As I'm sure you can appreciate this was not an attractive alternative.

In conclusion, whilst I share your concerns in relation to the loss of offices, I do feel that the actions taken by the Council, both in terms of its Planning Policies and in relation to its decisions on individual applications have had the effect of safeguarding the provision of office jobs for the longer term. In the meantime the Economic Development Unit continue to support the Town Centre and support job creation programmes including through the new Work Match project.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Ravi Govindia

Leader, Wandsworth Borough Council