



Justine Greening MP
Councillor Ravi Govindia

20 December 2013

38 Disraeli Road
London SW15 2DS

Dear Ms Greening and Councillor Govindia

Loss of offices in Putney

We write to you, Ms Greening as our MP and to Cllr Govindia as both the Leader of Wandsworth Council and a local Putney councillor, to express our concern at the loss of office space and jobs in Putney and ask what you will do to prevent further loss.

We are concerned that the loss of office space has a negative impact on our area. It is often said that offices are "good neighbours" as they are quiet, especially in the evenings and at night. The loss of quality local employment opportunities is a major consideration. You will be aware that Capsticks (the local legal practice employing several hundred people) were forced to leave the area and now benefit Wimbledon's economy instead of Putney's. Inghams Travel and VSO have also gone, and Pascal & Watson and Populous may be next. Local office employees keep our local retail businesses alive and viable during the daytime, and restaurants and bars busy at lunch and early evening. The same employees are more likely to live locally, reducing transport demands and, if not, travel in the opposite direction to the prevailing commuter flows. The loss of offices creates a dead dormitory suburb. The Council's Core Strategy recognises and seeks to avoid this.

We are aware that there are several causes of the loss of office space in Putney. Firstly we would address you, Ms Greening, on the matter of the recently introduced Permitted Development rights for the conversion of offices to residential, promoted by your colleagues in government, Mr Pickles and Mr Boles. We consider that the removal of planning control over land usage in this manner has the potential to strip Putney of locations for serious professional economic activity. We view this as highly undesirable and short sighted when, as a country, we are desirous of growth, even when set against the need to provide more homes. We have noted that Cllr Govindia's Conservative administration tried to obtain exemption from these changes for the central part of Putney but were refused. Similarly the London Mayor sought exemptions to stop part of central London being hollowed out of professional economic activity. This does not seem to suggest their confidence in the logic of the changes, introduced by their own political party in coalition, which run directly counter to the spirit of Localism.

We ask that you explain to us how these PD rights can make serious economic sense, and that you consider working with your colleagues in government to minimise the damage about to be wrought on urban centres, with particular reference to Putney. Most of the space being lost seems to be relatively modern, and exactly the sort of space needed by the small and medium sized businesses who will rebuild our economy.

We would now like to turn to two causes of office loss, Cllr Govindia, over which you have significant control. We would be grateful for your response on these.

The Putney Society

The amenity society for Putney and Roehampton. Registered Charity No. 263242
www.putneysociety.org.uk

The first is that none of the planning permissions granted for the redevelopment of office blocks in Putney in the last three years have adhered to Wandsworth Council's own planning policies in respect of office retention. Policies DMTS13 in the Development Management Policies Document (DMPD) and PLI4 East Putney in the Core Strategy require that the same footage of office accommodation is to be retained in replacement buildings. In the best case on the Upper Richmond Road (URR) only 52% was replaced, in the worst case only 12%. This total failure to apply a policy needs to be explained. Why does the Council have a policy if it is continuously flouted?

There is a second cause over which you have influence. This is the policy wording which allows developers and owners to claim that their office accommodation cannot be let as there is no demand, and thus they ask for permission to convert to residential. The Putney Society is aware of a number of instances where owners are disingenuously claiming an inability to let. We have three illustrations:-

a. 111 Upper Richmond Road is the most modern of the big blocks on the URR. Its design meets the IT requirements of modern office space. Professional involvement by one of our members with this building confirms a need to update the ventilation plant as the sole improvement needed and, most importantly, that there was a waiting list of companies interested in renting the office space. The owner's statement, in their current planning application, is that this building is beyond its economic life and cannot be rented out. This is not true by any normal measure.

b. The newly built offices at Centrus Apartments, 7 Felsham Road SW15, on the corner with Walkers Place, have remained empty for a long period of time. The owners have claimed an inability to let their offices and applied to convert to residential. Two serious offers have been made through the agent by small businesses in Putney who are reviewing their current premises. No response to these offers has been received from the building's owners who still claim that they cannot let their premises. [No suggestion is made of unlawful practice by the owners].

c. As reported in the Putney Town Centre Partnership Board minutes (meeting 24 October 2013), the offices in Carlson Court next to Wandsworth Park provide employment for 250-300 people in about 14 innovative small businesses – exactly the kind of businesses this government is trying to encourage. These businesses are now being offered 3 month rolling leases. This, as I am sure you will appreciate personally, is not a viable proposition for any business. This will lead to these offices being un-rentable under these conditions and, as both we and the Putney Town Centre Manager anticipated, a Prior Notification has now been submitted for these offices to be converted to residential.

We can cite other illustrations if requested.

We would be grateful if you, as our local councillor, would let us have a response, at the political level, to the prospect of the destruction of Putney's potential to offer a good variety and sufficient office accommodation to satisfy the local demand. A technical response from the Planning Department would, we feel, only confirm that some narrow technical criteria had been met. We regard the loss of office accommodation, especially as the economy is now picking up, as seriously detrimental to our environment in that the property mix in Putney is already heavily skewed towards residential.

Best wishes

Carolyn McMillan PhD
Chairman

Cc: Councillors, Wards for Putney and West Hill; Stephen Wallace, Putney Town Centre Manager