

Kingston Community (Free) School

A scandalous waste of Education money....

In June 2014 the Kingston Community School was granted permission by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) to open in September 2015. It was to be a 2-form entry primary School (420 pupils) as part of the Chapel Street Community Trust. Shortly after this, the EFA purchased a site in Norbiton, which had a 5-storey office block on it. The cost was around £9,000,000. The EFA expected to be able to convert this existing building. When it turned out to be unsuitable for a school, the Chapel Street Trust were asked to submit plans to demolish the office block and replace it with a new school building. The plans for this new building, with a residential block of flats above part of the proposed school, would cost around £7,600,000. Presumably, the flats were included to recoup some of the accruing costs of the project. Incidentally, the Chapel Street Trust is a MAT which runs seven schools around the country and is currently under Government Financial Notice.

The plans for the building eventually got through Kingston Council Development Control on April 21st. 2016. The final plans consisted of a 3-storey school building attached to a mixed use 6-storey block featuring 19 residential flats.

In the mean time (September 2015), the school had been opened with two reception classes in a small, unused, NHS building about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from the planned site. The NHS, apparently, want the building back by September 2017, and anyway it would not be able to house a third year of a 2-form entry school (reception – Year 2).

on a totally unsuitable site and building!.....

The plot, on which the building is to be sited, forms a triangle with an area of around 1,542 sq. meters. Along one of the longer sides of this triangle is a busy railway line on an embankment. On the other side there is a road that is no longer than 60 metres (Station Road). Each end of this road runs into 2 very busy arterial roads running towards Kingston Town Centre.

A cursory look at the design plans of the school would reveal how unsuitable the site and design of the building are for a 21st. century school. The total floor space of the school consists of 2,478sq.meters, which has been squeezed into the area. When the school is at capacity, there will be 420 children plus staff. Now that the residential block had to be part of the plans there is no room for anything but 2 very small playgrounds at ground level. Consequently, the main outside play ground/sports facilities are on the top of the 3-storey building. These would be 2 play areas of very approximately 135sqm (roughly 15m by 9m) each, for KS1 and KS2. The KS1 play area doubles as a sports play deck (with netting), barely enough space for 2 classes to run around in let alone a whole Key Stage group! The dining room/hall/sports and kitchen facilities are to be built in a basement area with very little or no daylight. This is situated under the block of flats with school admin. offices and main entrance at ground level.

The pollution in the area would need to be constantly monitored, as a result of the two very busy roads either side of Station Road, and indeed, in light of the fact that the

Mayor of London has shown great concern about the quality of London's air. The high embankment of the railway line runs along the side of the building, restricting light on the lower floors. There are no parking facilities for the school except for a small delivery and turning area. And all this, at a time when we are becoming increasingly worried about the emotional well being of children and the growing obesity problem.

With yet more very serious concerns....

As well as the unsuitability of the building and concern about air quality around the site, another very serious problem is that of Fire and Emergency Safety. Again, a cursory look at the plans will reveal that there is no safe area anywhere near the school to assemble the children and go through the process of taking registers etc. Indeed, the safety of the general public would be affected were the children and staff to go on either of the two busy main roads that are linked by the short road in front of the main school building. The pavements are narrow on both of the school sides of those main roads.

I raised my concern about Fire Safety - both in terms of the provision of a safe Assembly Area for the 420 children and staff, and the public in general - with all the councillors on the Development Control Committee. This was done by email before the date of the second committee meeting. Those that replied noted my concern - probably all they could do as members of the committee. At the meeting itself the issue was raised very briefly and the reply which came, I believe, from someone representing the EFA, was that Station Road would be the allocated safe assembly point for the children and staff. I can tell you categorically, it is not safe. It might be worth noting that we are talking about 14 rows of 30 children, when the school is running at capacity (2021). Station Road is precisely where Fire Engines and other emergency vehicles would need to draw up in order to access the building. In a real emergency, the children and staff would have to move onto the adjoining busy road, namely Coombe Road, which has a narrow pavement on the School side. The road the other end of Station Road is even busier, also with narrow pavements! This would not only subject the children and staff to further risk, but would be a danger to pedestrians and traffic passing by. I have heard an argument that the main road(s) could be closed off, but this will take time and by then the children etc. should have evacuated the building and had their registers taken etc. Also, the residents in the attached flats would need to be evacuated.

And the questions that need to be asked?

I have tried to pursue the issue of fire safety, fire drills, fire regulations and duty of care etc. by rewriting to the RBK councilors on the Development Control and as of yet have received only one response, which was of little help. I also wrote a letter to John Beckerleg who is the Director of supporting Services at the Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) who was unable to directly address my concerns. However, he was clearly worried about the issue and has promised to pass the letter on to someone who might be able to respond in more detail. Also, I have spoken directly to a local Fire Officer and an Area Fire Officer who were again very concerned and sympathetic, but tell me they cannot do anything until the building has a building control number. This will not happen until the existing office block is demolished and bricks are ready to be laid! Building control will not necessarily be overseen by

Kingston council, since it can now be allocated by the Trust to an independent private company! And this will be after the money for the project has been committed or indeed spent!

I feel this whole project leaves some very serious issues, not just for the Kingston Community School, but for future new school-builds and for new extensions to existing schools around the country.

1. What should the process of designing a school be from conception to completion of the building?

It seems to me extraordinary that in the 21st. century there are not regulations to ensure that a building design for a school is appropriate. This means that there is adequate play-ground space where children can run around, that there are playing fields for sports etc. that environmental issues like air quality are checked out and most importantly the building would be safe in the event of an emergency. This should be done before an architect puts pen to paper. The emergency services should be offering their advice and judgement before the plans are submitted to Development Control and not at a point when the finance of the project has been agreed and committed. Whatever the Fire Services say, while a school is being built, or after it is built, are they empowered and able to prevent its use as a school building if it does not reach a basic standard? As many people seem to agree that much of the planning process is the wrong way round, is there anything we can do about it?

2. What is the actual Legal status of Fire Regulations?

Are they the law or are they just mere regulations that, it seems, can be by-passed? The actual regulations that I have seen certainly imply that they are something that should be complied with, as should the commitment to regular Fire Drills, and the need for a safe place of assembly.

3. Who has Duty of Care of the children, staff and the general public were there to be a real emergency?

Who is accountable in such an event? In the light of Hillsborough and the Croydon Tram derailment, these questions are currently very cogent. In both these cases, it seems that proper regulations and safety measures could have been in place but were avoided, no doubt to save money. Of course, such accidents and events are so unlikely to happen!

In the not so far away old days, it would be more than a council's life was worth to renege on these sorts of requirements. Now, with the fragmentation of education through MATs, individual academies, foundation trusts etc., we seem to be moving towards a situation of no local accountability or control over these issues. Such responsibilities will no doubt be passed from pillar to post.