

Interested Party
8 Albert Embankment
Public Inquiry
10 December 2020
Naomi Siderfin

My name is Naomi Siderfin. I am an artist and curator and founding co-director of Beaconsfield. I am also a lecturer and Fellow of the Higher Education Authority. I reiterate these qualifications to emphasise that I am only an expert in my specific field, as the Director of a leading local and nationally renowned cultural institution that commissions contemporary art.

Working professionally as an artist and a part-time academic, is a vocational position. One plays many roles over the years, but, essentially, one does not change job. My professional life is that of a multi-tasker, but one of the constants for 25 years has been the building in question - the site of the former Lambeth Ragged Schools. I believe that makes me an expert in the use of the building, and in the actual practical effects of sunlight and daylight impacts on the users, internally and externally.

I am appearing today, not to repeat evidence that has already been given by Beaconsfield, but to shed light on aspects of our appeal that have, clearly, been misunderstood by the applicant's witnesses throughout their planning process to date.

Beaconsfield is, as you know, constituted as a charity to educate the public in contemporary art and as such has engaged thousands of people from all walks of life over its history of twenty five years. You have already heard about the wide-ranging production and educational activities that take place in all the spaces of the highly versatile site at 22 Newport Street. I would like for a few minutes to simply dwell on the Lower ground floor of the Victorian building. It is not only an exhibition space, but the heart and soul of the social aspect of our work – my colleague, David Crawforth, referred to it yesterday as the heartbeat of the organisation.

For a curator in central London, every space has a value. Every bit of space and every ray of light is utilised. The Lower Gallery has been a critical space for small scale works throughout the time we've worked there, either in group shows when one artist might take over the Lower Gallery or when solo artists are given use of all the galleries to display different aspects of their practice. A few examples would be Elsie Mitchell (1996), Chris Offili (1997), New Contemporaries (2000), Noble & Silver (2002), Bob and

Roberta Smith (2010), Jane Mulfinger (2016) and, as you heard yesterday, Erika Winstone (2019) and Tuula Narhinen (2020). We do not have the luxury of NOT using the lower space as a gallery.

Due to the high ceiling and tricky acoustic in the Upper Gallery, we also conduct workshops, talks and symposia in the Lower Gallery whenever possible, unless numbers attending prohibit. It is in the Lower Gallery that front of house staff (exhibition invigilators) are located, at the front desk, greeting all comers to the gallery. The original York stone flagged floor and limited light throughout make the Lower Gallery a potentially inhospitable place. At the moment it is warmed in the middle of the day by sunlight from the four south windows.

You will have observed on your visit that every aspect of the site is available as exhibition and making space, leaving very little left for administrative uses. The office in the corner of the ground floor, with its one south-facing window where I would normally sit to work, sometimes has its door closed, but more often has the door propped open to allow the flow of gallery staff and artists to flow in and out without having to knock and therefore disturb my concentration. This can be hazardous for productivity, since some of our regular visitors are vulnerable people who depend on dropping in to stroke the cat or cadge a cup of tea: one in particular is a resident of the managed housing in Lambeth High Street, which, as you heard from Whitgift House resident Helen Perrault, offers shelter to people with 'very serious mental health conditions'. Other drop in visitors include NEET (Not In Education Employment or Training) young people, with whom we have built trust and who might be unlikely to access the sort of specialised cultural experience we offer, in more formal institutions.

We also run a volunteer programme that supports people in developing skills to achieve their life goals; often those aspiring to curatorial careers, move on to achieve places to study on Masters courses in Curating. Our most recent example emailed me in March when Covid19 struck:

I was so sad to discover that Beaconsfield has to close. I know how much you, David, Tuula and others have invested in this commission and it's such a shame that it has to end this way.

I would just like to thank you for allowing me to be involved with the project. It has really been an inspiring, educative and uplifting placement and it has fuelled many of the ambitions I have for my own curatorial ambitions.

Others volunteer for different reasons. One of our Gallery Assistants wrote this about her experience of working for Beaconsfield:

I have been a volunteer at BGV for 7 years and it has been a hugely important part of my life. I first came to Beaconsfield after completing a fine art degree at UAL (University of the Arts London). Having experienced serious mental health issues for a number of years I was looking for a part time voluntary role which could make use of the skills I had gained at art college. I was keen to be able to contribute to an art organisation in a role that was sustainable for my health at the time and that would enable me to take further steps towards recovery (without putting myself under more pressure than I was able to cope with). I was attracted to the friendly and inclusive nature of the organisation and BGV's flexibility and warmth. I was so impressed by their varied programme, community involvement and was also very keen to support emerging artists. As someone who experiences mental health issues I am perhaps acutely aware of the difference art can make to health and well being as well as the obvious cultural importance... During times of relapse when I am unable to work I know that I still have a roof over my head as it were. I feel a real sense of community at BGV... the sense of belonging is invaluable to me...

Dr Littlefair drew your attention to research on Circadian Rhythms and the role that sunlight and daylight plays in wellbeing and recovery from illness. He said in his evidence: 'If the VSC goes down, light goes down and has adverse effect because more of the room will be poorly lit'. Without the daily changes in light levels, the Lower Gallery will die: for me, and many of those that I work with, it will become a depressing place to work or visit. I will leave it there.

In our Proof of Evidence we have demonstrated how the bulk and height of the 11-storey building C1 Newport Street will block light to our south facing windows and garden courtyard reception area, which has proved its capacity to grow both a fig tree and an olive tree in its sheltered environs. The evidence of Ian Dias endorsed our view. However, I believe I am right in observing that Mr Dias did not demonstrate the impact of the Eastern Garden Towers in Whitgift Street and its additional shadow falling on our North courtyard, meaning that we lose light on all sides.

As you know, we support in principle a Fire Museum, affordable homes and jobs in the area, but not at the price of visually and physically blighting this corner of North Lambeth. The proposed buildings behind our site are in such proximity that that they cannot fail to negatively impact on Beaconsfield's current activities and our own

ambitions to provide affordable creative workspaces in our own backyard (See Appendix 9 in our Proof) – by virtue of stealing our sunlight. My personal suspicion also, is that these seemingly overpopulated residential blocks will *not* be full of residents, but instead large numbers of investment flats will lie empty, like the other skyscrapers down the road in Nine Elms. I'm not sure which prospect is more disturbing. This scheme reads as over-development, it is too tall and too dense, and so has unacceptable impact on its neighbours, locality and the Conservation Area. Unlike the sensitively reimaged conversion of the 19th century Victor Mara scenic painting workshops, by architects Caruso St John, for Newport Street Gallery, the inappropriate scale of C1 Newport Street is compositionally jarring. It might well be a pleasing building in another context, but on our side of the railway line, rather than enhancing, it serves to obliterate the existing ambience and of course masks our particular historic building. In my local person's view, and also in my curatorial judgement, the benefits do not overcome these disadvantages.

I have followed the Inquiry with increasing fascination: 'Better than a court room drama' as another local viewer commented. Like a courtroom drama, the various protagonists have the ability to make one doubt one's own reason, knowledge and experience. The witnesses for the applicant could be forgiven for not understanding the aims, objectives and activities of the educational charity Beaconsfield, but it is harder to forgive them for not making greater efforts to find out.

I respectfully request that the Inspector and the Secretary of State take my knowledge, experience and observations into consideration when making a decision.