

Sent by email

Dear Residents,

10 days ago I attended the Enquiry into Lambeth's Local Plan on your behalf, to argue against the demolition of the bus station. It was an interesting exemplar of planners versus people.

There was a top table for the Inspector with two tables running down each side. On the one side were 6 representatives of local groups and associations. On the other side were 6 Lambeth planners, led by Sandra Roebuck (Assistant Director for Neighbourhoods and Investment), who did most of the talking. The set-up was not conducive to cosy interaction, nor was there any.

I had naively thought that Lambeth was the Listening Borough with employees whose role is to interpret and enable the priorities of the populus as fed through their Councillors. But not a bit of it. There was no trace of listening or learning. No, Sandra and Co were out to make sure the bus station is destroyed and that neither we nor the inspector should stand in the way.

Lambeth's argument appears to be:

Gyratories are out of fashion and being dissolved all over London so this one must go too [poor logic].

Gyratories are bad for cyclists and pedestrians so the gyratory must go [the first part true, but there may be other solutions].

If the gyratory goes we must create a "High Street". [No logic here, even if we or they knew what a "High Street" is in this context]

There is no room for a "High Street" as well as the bus station, so the bus station definitely must go [deeply flawed logic again].

The residents argument was:

The bus station provides safe, convenient changes of bus and transfers to tube and train. The present bus station was a huge advance when built only 9 years ago and is greatly valued by all. It gives protection from the elements, and requires no crossing of traffic or streets. It is ideal for the elderly, people with shopping, with children and the disabled. The building itself is iconic.

On this basis the starting point for reconfiguring Vauxhall and its gyratory should be that **the bus station should stay in its present form.**

The Lambeth response was that they have been listening and will now present 4 options for consultation. 1 and 2 provide bus stops spread throughout the neighbouring streets. They recognise these 2 options will find no favour [so why present them?]. Options 3 and 4 provide most [but not necessarily all] of the bus stops along the "High Street". No covered station, no protection from rain, snow and slush on the ground. Users will have to battle with traffic on the "High Street" and crossing it. No easy transfers for children, elderly, disabled, etc. In all 4 options the present bus station goes.

Needless to say at no stage was funding mentioned. One of the residents suggested that knocking down the recently built bus station would be a waste of money (and energy) but this appeared to be an irrelevance, or even in bad taste.

If you have read this far you may be wondering what is meant by a "High Street" in Vauxhall. This went in and out of focus, mostly out. It seemed to be a street with desirable boutiquey shops, cafes with people sipping lattes in the endless sun, up-market small food shops, buses (and cars?) cruising silently up and down and other good things. The suggestion that most high streets are long on betting shops, charity shops, hairdressers, pollution and litter found no response. The "High Street" is to be a focus within Vauxhall Cross. But then it is to be linked to the "linear park" stretching down to the Mega-Sainsburys. Or to stretch all the way to the Battersea Power Station. Who knows? Answers came, but no clarity.

The Inspector (Susan Heywood) did ask what was the evidence base for a "High Street". Lambeth said they would "send data and justification to her later".

The Inspector was focused, clear and asked pertinent questions. Everyone had their chance to speak but she allowed no repetition or rambling. But even if she (hopefully) finds the Lambeth plan wanting, the signs are that words in the plan will be changed but the policy will not alter and the bus station will be condemned to damnation.

So why is Lambeth so committed to the "High Street", and therefore to demolish the bus station? This is a mystery.

Could it be cock-up? TfL and Lambeth were so focused on sorting out the traffic and the gyratory that the bus station got overlooked and undervalued. This now seems unlikely as the drive to demolish the bus station is deeply embedded and not to be deterred by mere residents, nor by logic.

So could it be conspiracy? This seems far fetched, but it has been suggested that demolishing the bus station would release land for yet another Tower Block, this one opening onto the "High Street". Another Tower Block will bring extra business rates, section 106 and maybe other immediate financial benefits. But the residents will lose their much valued bus station for ever.

In support of the conspiracy hypothesis: loose talk by a TfL official at a recent open meeting suggested that the Tower Block would help cover the £50M cost of widening the Vauxhall Railway arch from 5 to 8 lanes. Good-bye gyratory, come in 8 lane two-way urban super highways?

So whatever happens the plan is for the Bus Station to go...

Is this localism? Is this democracy?

Malcolm Green

