Stephen Platts
Director of Regeneration
Southwark Council
160 Tooley Street
SE1 2QH

20 April 2016

Dear Stephen,

**Canada Water Area Masterplan and new Leisure Centre**

I am writing on behalf of the Liberal Democrat group on Southwark Council. Several of our councillors represent areas covered by the Masterplan or immediately adjacent to it.

While we support new homes and jobs in the Rotherhithe area, Liberal Democrats have always argued that development must be done 'with' local residents, and not 'to' them. Many residents have contacted us with real fears about the proposals after visiting the Masterplan exhibition and seeing the scale and density of the buildings proposed.

Liberal Democrat councillors have already argued in response to the Council’s New Southwark Plan consultation that tall buildings should only be located where the community is supportive and the buildings are delivering genuinely affordable homes. It is clear that the Masterplan proposals for tall buildings do not have all the local community’s support.

The most serious concerns relate to the lack of infrastructure planning in the Masterplan as a result of such a huge projected increase in local population. There will inevitably be additional pressure on both schools and GP surgeries, as well as the Jubilee and Overground lines and local buses. Older residents remember only too well the regeneration of the Surrey Docks area in the 1980s and 90s when thousands of new homes were built without the required infrastructure in place and this has taken decades to address.

Transport in the area is under particular pressure, with buses too crowded to board and the roads on and off the peninsula regularly in gridlock with knock-on effects for local air quality. Liberal Democrats have been campaigning for an additional circle shuttle bus around the peninsula, as well as a walking and cycling bridge from Rotherhithe to Canary Wharf. There are also ongoing concerns with regard to local water pressure on higher floors in residential blocks and broadband speeds. These basic infrastructure needs must be secured as a minimum before any plans to massively increase the population are agreed.

As it stands currently, we feel that the Masterplan would alter the nature of the local area with many of its most attractive features – such as the water and green areas, low-rise buildings and low density of the area – being sacrificed. The environment and carbon reduction should both be at the heart of the plans but are not.

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With specific regard to the ten mature trees which would be felled if the Council’s preferred leisure centre site proceeds, the Masterplan does not seem to recognise that older trees in a mature copse are not the same as ten new trees planted on an avenue. Their social, environmental, and ecological functions are completely different. Residents want more areas of nature in the Masterplan area, not an identikit Canary Wharf with sterile and homogenised planting.

The request for feedback on building designs in the Masterplan is welcome. However, this is difficult to achieve until concrete proposals come forward rather than the current vague phrases like "high quality specification" that nobody would disagree with.

We therefore urge British Land to now listen to all the feedback from residents and come back with a revised plan that shows more respect to the existing nature and character of the area. Local residents must be consulted genuinely and the Masterplan changed as a result.

Nowhere is this more apparent than with the site of the new leisure centre. Liberal Democrat councillors have been concerned about the Council’s plans since it announced its ‘preferred site’ on plot 6. We successfully ‘called in' the decision to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee where there was cross-party agreement that a properly informed consultation should take place. It is essential that this commitment is real and that the Council and British Land are willing to change their position.

The current preferred site - a green space - is a significant change from the Council’s previously identified site and residents are concerned that the location of the new leisure centre has been dictated by developers, not the community. British Land claims it is all due to the Council, but it is clear that this is the preferred site of the developer.

We were pleased therefore that the consultation included the other options for possible sites for a new leisure centre which had been considered by the Council. This is something Liberal Democrat councillors had pushed for. However, the Council has still insisted on announcing plot 6 as its preferred site during the consultation despite the fact that the land is currently woodland. The exhibition model also showed the new leisure centre height to be the same as existing homes in Hothfield Place when it will in fact be two storeys higher.

Like many residents, we feel this gives the impression that a decision on the site has been pre-determined and the consultation is therefore misleading. The Council’s recent decision to include the existing Seven Islands leisure centre site as one of the lots of land to build new council homes, despite it being one of the spaces considered for a new leisure centre in the consultation, reinforces the view the Council has already made its mind up.

We are also very concerned about the proposals for a 25-metre pool at the new leisure centre, especially if the length is being dictated by the ‘preferred site.’ The original proposal was for an Olympic-length (50-metre) pool and though the Council is now citing Sport England guidance to justify the reduced length, this is just guidance, not a standard. There is a clear option of both 25 metre and 50 metre pools. There are, of course, some advantages to a 25m pool, but residents will understandably fail to understand how a reduction in size from the current 33m pool at Seven Islands is an improvement for the community. An Olympic-sized pool with a diving board and a deep end for diving, free diving and scuba diving would be a genuine improvement and a real Olympic legacy.
Liberal Democrats believe that the Council should give a public commitment to review the decision on its preferred site if the consultation shows overwhelming public opposition to it. The Council must ensure a genuine consultation where the people who live in the area and will use the new leisure centre get to decide where it is and what it looks like.

Canada Water is an amazing opportunity for jobs, homes, leisure and for finally improving the infrastructure in the area. It will also create huge profits for British Land. It is so essential that maximizing those profits does not become the driving force in this regeneration project. Existing residents must not have fifty-storey towers imposed on them - and they must certainly not without improving buses and broadband, building the bridge to Canary Wharf, creating new schools and GP surgeries, protecting and enhancing the green environment and tackling air pollution.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Anood Al-Samraii
Leader of the Opposition

Cc British Land
Canada Water Consultative Forum
Surrey Docks ward councillors