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Offices should not be priority for new buildings say Londoners

A recent YouGov poll of adults in Britain commissioned by Coin Street Community Buildersⁱ found that less than 1% of Britons, including less than 1% of Londoners believe offices should be a priority when building on brownfield land.

Half of the London respondents in the nationwide poll (50%) believe housing should be prioritised for these sites and a quarter of the same group (26%) think brownfield land should be used for public service buildings or community facilities. Just 7% of London respondents want shops, hotels, and restaurants on these sites, and not a single respondent would prioritise offices.ⁱⁱ

The YouGov poll looks at views on developing on brownfield land – plots that have previously been used and are ready for redevelopment. British adults across the nation, of all common political affiliations, and demographic profiles, rated housing as the number one priority when building on brownfield sites. National results mirrored those of London, with 50% of British adults saying housing should be a priority, including half of 2019 Conservative voters (51%).

Over 74,000 homes a year are needed in London to meet housing need, with around 45,000 of these in the social and affordable categories.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite this, planning applications for large office-led developments continue to crop-up across the capital, amidst the continuing housing crisis which saw 13,325 rough sleepers recorded in London between April 2022 and June 2023^{iv}. Meanwhile, Goldman Sachs warned in June that demand for office space is in decline.^v

The new polling data released today demonstrates public support for the government's promise to build more homes on brownfield land in cities with the vast majority of respondents (75%) wanting to see brownfield prioritised over greenfield sites (1%) where housing is concerned.^{vi}

This follows a delay last month to Levelling Up Secretary, Michael Gove's final decision on plans for an enormous office block directly on London's South Bank, home to some of the capital's most visited sites, including Oxo Tower Wharf, the Southbank Centre, the National Theatre, and Tate Modern.

Plans for 72 Upper Ground, the office building, dubbed a "monstrosity"^{vii} and "slab"^{viii} by commentators, went to public inquiry late last year following significant public opposition to the development.

The local community, along with nearly 6000 signatories to a public petition, is hoping Michael Gove will refuse planning permission for Mitsubishi Estates' proposed redevelopment of the former ITV television studios and headquarters. Not a single home is included in the Mitsubishi scheme despite ITV having been granted consent in 2018 for a mixed-use development including 211 flats. The Secretary of State's decision is expected on or before 6 October.

David Hopkins, Director of Community at Coin Street Community Builders said:

“There is a housing crisis across the country and especially in London. We support redevelopment on under-used brownfield sites, but housing and green spaces should be a part of those plans wherever possible.

“What we see with 72 Upper Ground is an office block that meets neither the housing needs of the local community nor business needs of the area. It clearly goes against what most people want from these kinds of sites and places like the South Bank.

“Michael Gove is getting it right when he takes developments like 72 Upper Ground to public inquiry. We are pleased he is spending extra time to really consider what’s right for neighbourhoods where there is a desperate shortage of homes for residents.”

[Ends]

Notes to editors

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,020 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 26th - 28th August 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). London figures are based on a sub-sample of 191 people in London surveyed as part of the wider GB poll.

72 Upper Ground

Developed by CO-RE and Mitsubishi Estate, 72 Upper Ground received planning consent from Lambeth Council in March 2022, but was “called in” by then Secretary of State, Greg Clark in September of the same year.

The new development on the South Bank would have 225% of the floor area of the 1970s tower it replaces and add nearly 30% to its height. It has been described in the national press as ‘a brute of a building’ (Rowan Moore in The Observer), ‘an aggressive behemoth’ (Sir Simon Jenkins in The Guardian), and ‘a grotesque monstrosity’ (Richard Morrison in The Times).

Secretary of State, Michael Gove was due to make a final decision on the planning application for 72 Upper Ground on 8 August. He has now delayed that decision to on or before 6 October.

Housing need

Lambeth Council states on its website that it receives over 3,000 new housing applications annually, while the housing waiting list has more than 27,000 applicants. In 21/22 714 net additional dwellings were completed against the London Plan target of 1,335.

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Carbon

On Carbon, the argument of local campaigners is that the environmental impact would be inherently less if parts of the current ITV building were reused to create a mixed-use scheme for both commercial and residential use. Consultant Kiru Balson from engineer firm Max Fordham prepared a report for the public inquiry - can be found here [CD 9 - Save Our Southbank's Inquiry Documents - Google Drive](#) and [CD 9 - Save Our Southbank's Inquiry Documents - Google Drive](#)

Notably, on the developers plans to build a two layered basement across the site, Balson noted:

Excavation waste – The proposal is to create a new two-level basement across the majority of site footprint. Around 23-24 Olympic pools amount of soil will have to be shifted off-site, and to comply with the LPG, 95% of this would have to be put to beneficial use. No commitment has been made by the applicant to meet this policy requirement. Aside from waste, the basement is to be constructed out of concrete piles (1300mm diameter) around the perimeter of the site. Considering the scale of construction operation required to create the basement, a justification for provision of this basement should be given considering the scale of additional embodied carbon incurred, waste related environmental impact, added construction energy use.

Office space demand

We noted in the press release recent [warnings from Goldman Sachs on the London office market weakening](#).

Michael Ball of the Waterloo Community Development Group provided this additional analysis.

Waterloo is designated an 'Opportunity Area' in the London Plan, with an expectation that office space for an additional 15,000 jobs will be developed from 2007-41 (plus 1,500 additional homes).

Several major office schemes have come forward in Waterloo in recent years:

Shell Centre	built 2016	73,000m ²
Elizabeth House, York Rd	approvals 2013, 2021	146,000m ²
Waterloo Estate, Waterloo Rd	permission expected soon	30,000m ²
72 Upper Ground	permitted but called in for Inquiry, awaiting decision	90,000m ²
Hatfields/ Blackfriars	application submitted	80,000m ²

These are massive schemes, totalling 419,000m², the equivalent of 30,000 jobs (using the standard calculation of 14m² per employee) - so this is double the target for the Opportunity Area to 2041! And this is without the 159,000m² of offices proposed for Royal St, near St Thomas' hospital, which the applicants estimate would provide around 9,000 jobs.

There is in fact a danger of over-supply and schemes not being built out. The pandemic has significantly changed office use. This is leading to a re-alignment and probably contraction of office space requirements: only three months ago the news of HSBC moving out of Canary Wharf, for example.

In Waterloo, for example, permission was first granted for 100,000m² of office to replace Elizabeth House (adjacent to Waterloo Station) in 1996, then 2013, then 2021, but nothing has never been built to replace the existing tatty 1950's office: the most recent scheme was about to begin demolition in 2020 when the pandemic struck, and the developers there have recently announced they were putting a halt for two years because of finance and downturn office market. [One Waterloo | HB Reavis](#)

About us

Coin Street Community Builders (CSCB) is a social enterprise working in Waterloo and North Southwark. CSCB owns, manages, and maintains the riverside walkway between the National Theatre and Sea Containers, Bernie Spain Gardens, Oxo Tower Wharf, Gabriel's Wharf, and the Coin Street neighbourhood centre. It is freehold owner of the Iroko, Mulberry, Palm and Redwood housing developments which are leased to primary co-operatives managed by their tenants. <https://coinstreet.org/>

CSCB view

The scale, bulk and siting of the proposed development is excessive, overbearing and overly dominant. The wanton disregard of the South Bank, one of London's most popular amenities, is unacceptable and short-sighted. At the public inquiry it became apparent that the existing tower with its high floor to ceiling heights and fabulous views could be repurposed for residential use and that is what should now happen.

Coin Street is not anti-office, we believe in mixed-use developments that meet local business and community needs. 72 Upper Ground is excessive in its scale, not high enough quality in its design, and adds to the over-provision of office space in this area when housing, especially

affordable homes, are needed to ensure the area thrives for the long-term. Our YouGov data also demonstrates that the public want housing to be prioritised on brownfield land, not offices, restaurants, and shops.

For more information

Helena Inwood (CSCB) h.inwood@coinstreet.org 020 7021 1635 (direct/mobile)

ⁱ All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,020 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 26th - 28th August 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). London figures are based on a sub-sample of 191 people in London surveyed as part of the wider GB poll.

ⁱⁱ The poll asked: Which of the following types of development, if any, do you think should be prioritised when building on brownfield sites? Please select the one you think should be prioritised the most. London residents responded as follows:

50% Housing
19% Public service buildings
6% Industrial buildings
7% Community facilities
4% Retail / Shops
0% Offices
2% Hotels
1% Restaurants
1% Other
10% Don't know

ⁱⁱⁱ Bramley, G. (2018) Housing supply requirements across Great Britain: for low-income households and homeless people. London: Crisis and National Housing Federation. P. 11, Table 1.3. Accessed:

https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/239700/crisis_housing_supply_requirements_across_great_britain_2018.pdf

^{iv} <https://www.bigissue.com/news/housing/britains-homelessness-shame-cold-hard-facts/>

^v <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-12/london-office-market-will-weaken-further-goldman-analysts-warn>

^{vi} The poll asked: When it comes to selecting land for new housing developments, do you think the government should prioritise building on greenfield, or brownfield sites, or both equally? Respondents answered as follows:

75% Brownfield sites
1% Greenfield sites
14% Both equally
10% Don't know

^{vii} <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/72-upper-ground-this-monstrosity-must-not-be-allowed-to-sully-the-south-bank-zfmk5ls7x>

^{viii} <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/06/london-planning-river-developments-thames-south-bank-block>