



Amanda Wolthuisen  
Chief of Staff to the President and Director of Public Affairs  
Imperial College

Via email

24<sup>th</sup> August 2023

Dear Amanda Wolthuisen

### **Imperial College's role as a developer – One Portal Way, North Acton**

I am following up on our earlier exchange of emails on the above (see attachment with this email).

OPDC are currently re-consulting the public on a further set of changes to the planning application for this development, which was originally submitted in November 2021.

The Old Oak Neighbourhood Forum has submitted an **additional objection** to this application. A copy is also attached. This is the fifth in a series of representations, necessitated by changes in the scope and content of the project during the 20 month period since the application was submitted by the College's planning agents Icenl.

As you will see, the Forum is arguing that the 2021 hybrid application, as varied and reconsulted on twice, should now be withdrawn.

Much has changed in the wider financial and planning context since this development was originally conceived. The latest changes, as a result of which the western part of the site would be allocated for meanwhile uses within the existing Carphone Warehouse building, suggest that the College is reconsidering the financial risks of this highly ambitious development project. This is unsurprising at a time when borrowing costs continue to rise and bear no relation to those of November 2021.

As a body of local residents who have been involved in the activities and decisions of OPDC since the Development Corporation started life in April 2015, we consider that there is growing evidence that the 'North Acton Cluster' will prove to be one of London's more disastrous examples of urban renewal. The proposals for One Portal Way will consolidate this position. The one redeeming feature of the proposals (the central public open space with new cycle/pedestrian routes) is now to be curtailed were this revised hybrid planning application to be granted consent.

OPDC is consulting the public on these latest changes for only 30 days, during August. Although the [consultation website](#) run by London Communications Agency carries a brief update, this does not make clear the implications for the public open space.

We think that the further reputational damage to Imperial will be significant, were this project to continue as a 10 year development of 7 residential and commercial buildings. As you will be aware, we have previously questioned with the Office for Students whether a development of this scale, with no university or academic content, falls within the College's lawful powers and vires. We will continue to pursue this issue, should a planning consent be granted.

The College's responses to questions about the origins of and aims for One Portal Way project have been minimal. Our submission to the OfS (annexed to the planning objection) includes a chronology of this correspondence. In terms of documents available to the public, the College's current level of transparency is far less than it was a decade ago.

You said in your email of June 1<sup>st</sup> 2023 that *Imperial publishes minutes of Council meetings and the University Management Board on the College website; the respective sub-committees report regularly into these two governance functions.*

I subsequently received a response from Kathryn Charlesworth saying *The University Management Board is the guiding coalition advising the President on all major strategic, policy and operational issues, and reporting through the President to the University Council. Whilst our Council minutes are published publicly online, the University Management Board is an internal management meeting, and therefore the summaries are only published internally.*

This came as no surprise to me as I had been unable to access copies of UMB minutes. But it had been alarming to learn that as the College's Director of Public Affairs, you seemed to be unaware of Imperial's current minimalist approach to transparency and openness.

The public in North Acton and the wider area have legitimate concerns that the College may be over-reaching itself in its development proposals for One Portal Way. We need assurances that this is not the case, given that large-scale residential and commercial development is not the College's primary function nor its area of expertise.

We note that John Allan, former chair of the College Council and also chair of Barratt Developments has stepped down from his involvement with the College.

Currently there are several examples of local authorities which have embarked (as forms of 'investment') on high risk property acquisitions and developments, and/or irresponsible use of public sector borrowing and lending powers (e.g. Thurrock, Slough, Spelthorne, Woking). Public bodies which reduce the opportunities for citizen scrutiny of their internal affairs can come badly unstuck. The College's current lack of openness seems to us to be high risk for the College's management, should things go wrong.

As I understand, Imperial publishes a list of Endowment Board investment holdings on a quarterly basis, but no records or minutes of its discussions as a Board accountable to the College Council? One Portal Way appears in this listing under the heading of 'Commercial' with no financial information or further detail. Even 'failing' local authorities publish agendas and minutes, as a result of requirements on access to information.

It is now nearly 2 years since I raised these issues and questions in a letter to Alice Sewell (copy attached). We quoted in a February 2022 email to Alice the following extract from the 2020 *Guide for Members of Governing Bodies of Universities and Colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*.

*"1.4 Governing bodies are entrusted with funds, both public and private, and therefore have a particular duty to observe the highest standards of corporate governance. This includes ensuring and demonstrating integrity and objectivity in the transaction of their business, and wherever possible following a policy of openness and transparency in the dissemination of their decisions".*

We do not wish to have to resort to FoI requests to gain a better understanding of why the College originally embarked on its proposals for One Portal Way? We are aware the site was purchased with

PBSA in mind and leased to Dixons Carphone for a time. We have read the material in planning statements and elsewhere which presents an overall rationale for the College's presence in parts of West London. But the claimed links between the White City campus activities and those at North Acton are unconvincing – particularly when the scheme at One Portal Way includes no university or academic content.

**Given the very limited information included in the minutes of Imperial College Council meetings, are you willing to provide copies (redacted as necessary for any genuinely commercially confidential information) of the following:**

- **The Endowment Board annual report (paper 7.4 on the agenda of the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 22 Council meeting).**
- **Report of the Property Committee referred to as part of item 8 on the same agenda.**

This level of information would have been readily available online to the public in previous periods of College governance. From reading recent Council minutes, it is clear that the College has set itself the task of restoring trust with its student body and stakeholders. Residents in West London need to feel part of this process,

As before I am copying this email to John Anderson as the lead member of staff for the Endowment Board and to Alice Sewell, as well as to the President in his capacity as an ex officio member of the Endowment Board.

Regards,

Henry Peterson OBE,  
Adviser to the Old Oak Neighbourhood Forum

Cc College President, John Anderson, Alice Sewell Imperial College  
Mark Walker, Chair Old Oak Neighbourhood Forum