

DC/21/122742 Lewisham Way Youth and Community Centre

From [Chair - Brockley Society <chair@brockleysociety.org.uk>](mailto:chair@brockleysociety.org.uk) on 2021-09-11 05:44

DC/21/122742 | Retrospective planning application for the change of use of a Lewisham Way Youth And Community Centre, 138 Lewisham Way SE14 (Use Class F2(b) into a recording studio (Use Class E) with ancillary office space and shared community workspace (Use Class E), together with the alterations to the existing shop front, the construction of a wooden pergola, landscaping works, installation of replacement of windows, the creation of cycle parking, waste and recycling facilities and the creation of a 'community garden. | LEWISHAM WAY YOUTH AND COMMUNITY CENTRE, 138 LEWISHAM WAY, LONDON, SE14 6PD

Dear Jesenka

Brockley Society discussed this application at the meeting of its planning group on 8 September 2021. We wish to register the following objection.

Our main objection is to the change of the use class of the building from F2(b) to class E.

Lewisham Way Youth and Community Centre has been a vital part of the local community since it was established in 1973 and until its closure in 2016. The centre is next door to the Grade II listed ArtHouse, a building of considerable heritage importance.

The Youth and Community Centre is itself a heritage asset, very precious to the community because of its long history. It is more akin to an "intangible asset" than a bricks and mortar asset.

The site is within the Brockley Conservation Area, which has an Article 4 Direction. The applicants' terms "on the boundary of the Brockley Conservation Area" and "on the boundary of Brockley Article 4 Direction" are superfluous.

Preserving a heritage asset

Lewisham's Local Plan states:

[Understanding heritage: Our heritage assets are irreplaceable. Their value must be understood if they are to be preserved for future generations. ... Highly valued facilities include Libraries, Youth centres, Leisure and recreation centres. Community facilities are important to health and wellbeing and should be protected.](#)

Joan Anim-Addo's book, *Longest Journey: A History of Black Lewisham*, describes how the building was identified as a place where young West Indians could

"come together to do responsible things in their environment with a view to helping them to increase their sense of identity and confidence in themselves". -- Asquith Gibbs MBE.

In the 1980s the centre developed from a youth centre alone into a wider community centre, addressing needs of young mothers and fathers as well, and including educational needs:

"Lewisham could have exploded into a massive situation like the Brixtons, the Toxteths, the Tottenhams. I think everyone has been very lucky because there have been some quality people working in Lewisham as community workers." — Harry Powell (sportsman and youth leader)

All kinds of services and activities were provided at the centre over the decades, including choirs, music production, numeracy and literacy classes, mentoring, photography and drama. Countless local residents remember how the centre helped them and enriched their lives.

Photographic artist John Goto published a book *Lovers' Rock* in 2013 containing photos of young people taken when he taught evening classes in photography at the centre for two years. It is an amazing portrait of the young people who benefitted from it.

The centre played its role in the development of Lover's Rock in south London: the Lovers' Rock record label was set up round the corner from the centre in Upper Brockley Road. Dances were held in the centre's large hall at the back. Film making was also offered at the centre. The centre was a safe place.

The Centre continued to be a vital resource into the 21st century. A petition has been established which illustrates the centre's place at the heart of the community.

Why did the centre close?

The applicant asserts that the centre was defunded as it was "failing to deliver the community benefits required". This totally dismisses the economic background of the last decade: central government austerity resulted in huge cuts to council funding, and this in turn meant cuts to much youth service provision nationally.

Funding has been slashed for buildings and for youth service staffing, along with libraries, play centres and much else. That is the main reason the centre closed.

There is a crying need for a youth and community centre today

There is great anxiety in the local community over lack of facilities for young people, leading to disaffection, boredom, frustration, violence. This is an issue for all of Lewisham's youth, but specifically for BAME young people.

If the applicants talk to local people they will hear their frustration that the centre could be permanently closed. If change of use is permitted the building is lost forever as a potential youth and community centre which could be revived when the economic and funding situation changes. Meantime we fear the increase in youth violence and disaffection.

We have been told that in 2019 the council's agent advertised the building for commercial use "subject to planning permission". But the current lessee received the lease without receiving planning permission for change of use. Why was this was allowed? The building is still F2(b). Was LBL given the impression that the applicant would operate a community centre of some kind?

Demand for social infrastructure facilities

Refusal for application DC/21/120491 included that it failed to "adequately demonstrate that there is no demand for social infrastructure facilities in the local area". The current application similarly fails to demonstrate this. The applicants' list of alternative community facilities demonstrates a lack of understanding of what constitutes a "community facility" and highlights the contrary: an utter lack of facilities.

Only four of the 15 venues listed in the application is in the Brockley Ward, where the centre is based: the ArtHouse plays a community role, but is not a community centre. The Place in the Park is a small drop-in play group with some yoga classes. The Leander Centre has limited provision. Not one venue is listed in the south of Brockley Ward where much of the need for a community infrastructure exists. Telegraph Hill and Greenwich West are .8 and .9 miles from the centre as the crow flies. But people do not fly: they require often indirect public transport. Other venues listed are even further.

There is a desperate lack of meeting halls in the area for tenants' associations, clubs and community groups. One of the TRAs used to meet in the centre until it closed. Facilities for other activities are few and far between.

The application has not demonstrated that "there is no demand for social infrastructure facilities in the local area".

Needs of the local community

Nothing in the application gives confidence in the statements that the proposed uses are "specific to the needs of the local community", that the proposed use will "provide flexible employment land for local SMEs, Startups, Freelancers, Hobbyists and Professionals working from home". The applicants have been in the building for over two years. Where is the evidence of this use, as opposed to a single commercial use?

No evidence is provided that the "community garden" will encourage "cross-pollination". A "community" garden is not a drawing on architects' plans. It has to be developed by involving people otherwise it becomes just a messy, neglected area. The amount of effort required to transform the adjoining Luxmore Gardens over many years is a case in point.

The applicant claims there is a local demand for flexible office workspace and that this will provide a social and economic benefit to the local community. This is not the same as community infrastructure. And why has it not happened during their two-year occupancy?

Enforcement issues

Changes were made to the front of the building by removing the fascia displaying "Lewisham Way Youth and Community Centre" without permission. A landmark has been destroyed.

The back hall was demolished without permission. This was drawn to planners' attention in 2018 during

the 10 Malpas Road consultations.

The applicant provides no evidence that the council failed to find new community activities that could be held in the centre. Infrastructure facilities cannot be run as commercial businesses.

We ask you to consider these points in reaching your decision.

Kind regards

Clare Cowen

Chair, Brockley Society

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