



Environmental Justice in Somers Town and the Euston Area

An Inquiry into the Cumulative Impacts of
Development on the Health and Well-being of
Local People

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**Searching for Environmental Justice in the Euston Area:
An Inquiry into the Cumulative Impacts of Development on the
Health and Wellbeing of Local People**



Joint report by Voluntary Action Camden, Somers Town Neighbourhood Forum, Environmental Law Foundation and UCL



SOMERS TOWN
Neighbourhood Plan

Introduction

'It's about the amount of construction that has happened in this area over 20-30 years...we're not getting any respite from that.'

'To feel the environment around me shifting so quickly and for the worst is depressing.'

'The prospect of all this work continuing until 2033 (and probably longer) is already depressing. I was very happy living on Regents Park Estate but that happiness has gone. I now dread the future.'

'I am very concerned about the long-term effects of poor air quality on my health; as an older person, I am likely to be particularly vulnerable to this.'

'Loss of nearly 100 trees, affecting air quality. A whole generation of children will grow up with noise, dust and pollution.'

'There is no justice for Somers Town.'

The Euston area has long been subject to intensive development involving large scale and long-term projects and programmes, especially over the past thirty years. Many smaller projects have also taken place, having a marked effect on the locality. Further development projects are proposed or planned.

As a result of these developments, local people have witnessed, and experienced at first hand, damaging deterioration of air quality in the area, the decline and loss of their local open green spaces, the felling of mature trees, the clearance and destruction of places holding great cultural and historic significance, and serious problems with housing and amenities. The anticipation of construction stretching far into the future is a constant worry for local people and this has created a state of anxiety and fear.

In recognition of the wide range and cumulative effects of these environmental problems and harms arising from such an extraordinary level of development in the Euston area and felt by local people on an everyday basis, **Voluntary Action Camden, Somers Town Neighbourhood Forum, Environmental Law Foundation** and **UCL** convened an Environmental Justice Inquiry in 2017. This Inquiry included a series of workshops, held with the main aim of gathering evidence from local people about the impacts of developments in the Euston area – past, present and future – upon their physical and mental health and well-being, and the quality of the environment they live in.

In the main report, we summarise the workshop discussions and outputs of these events, such as proposals for future action. As a result, we propose a set of **community-led recommendations**

and, drawing upon this, **an action plan for making better and more sustainable future planning and environmental management decisions about this area, and how best to manage and improve** the local environment, during, and after, major construction works.

Summary of Inquiry findings

Mental health impacts

- **The state of the environment is a matter of great concern for people living in the Euston area.** Local people attribute to air pollution, loss of nearby open green spaces, loss of homes, heritage and amenities, and disruption to everyday life caused by noise, dust, and light pollution, and changes to walkways and transport **serious depression, anxiety, stress, fear, a sense of despair and hopelessness.**

Physical health impacts

- **Local people experience an exacerbation of respiratory conditions, such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) when exposed to air pollution in the Euston area,** with people's symptoms alleviated when they leave the area, even for a short period.

Air quality infringements

- **EU health standards for air quality are infringed in the Euston area,** providing grounds for enforcement action.

Loss of local open green spaces and trees

- **Local people value very highly open green spaces in the area:** such spaces are essential to counter the stresses and strains of living in a densely populated and polluted part of London, and provide a very welcome 'breathing space', and opportunities for playing, socialising, holding community events and connecting with nature.
- **There is a strong sense of anger at the loss of open green spaces in the area: the recent closure and subsequent loss of St James's Gardens (a three-acre park) has had a devastating effect on the everyday life of local people.** For many, St James's Gardens was a place of peace and tranquillity in a busy and noisy part of London.
- **The consequences of the Community Investment Programme (CIP) in Central Somers Town in reducing the availability of open green spaces in Somers Town, and particularly the loss of Coopers Lane Tenants and Residents Association (TRA) Community Garden, will be similarly devastating to local people.**

- **There is an equally strong sense of anger about the loss of gardens and open spaces in Regents Park Estate**, as several such areas have already been lost to housing development as part of the HS2 programme to re-house people nearby, following demolition of their homes.
- **The planned felling of approximately 200 mature trees in the Euston area along Cardington Street, Eversholt Street, Hampstead Road, and Euston Road, and in St James's Gardens and Euston Square Gardens, associated with HS2 developments, has led to dismay, anger and disbelief on the part of many local people who consider this a senseless act of ecological destruction.** The total number of trees taken by HS2 in Camden is 500, not including those that may be lost from related utility works. Many local people have questioned the need for this felling, arguing for alternative approaches to this drastic and irreversible act, for example re-routing utilities. There is incredulity that felling mature trees in Euston Square Gardens is to make way for *temporary* sites for construction vehicles and a taxi rank displaced by work at Euston station.
- There has been an additional significant loss of trees caused by the Regent's Park Estate Replacement Homes and Central Somers Town CIP schemes.
- **Local people identify a close correlation between the loss of open green spaces and trees and declining air quality:** this causal connection, substantiated by research, has major implications for urban planning and decision-making.

Loss of amenity, loss of homes and social upheaval
- Local people have lost their homes and been displaced, with many losing valued connections with neighbours and local amenities as a result. The impacts of this have been devastating for many people, especially for vulnerable elderly people who have lived in the area their adult lives.
- New build on green spaces between blocks of housing (to re-house people who have lost their homes to HS2) on the Regent's Park Estate has led to a loss of light and privacy, compromising the dignity of people in their homes, and creating social divisions and disruption.
- Disturbance to traffic routes from building works, and changes to rights of way have created difficulties for navigation, especially for elderly and disabled people. The area is now an 'obstacle course' and a 'battlefield'. There are serious concerns about access to the area by emergency vehicles and the ability of people to continue accessing social and health facilities.

- Building work (from CTRL (Channel Tunnel Rail Link at St Pancras) to HS2) has led to problems with vermin, made worse by a refusal on the part of developers to accept their responsibility for this problem.

Loss of places of heritage and history

- **There is well-founded dismay and anger on the part of local people that the construction work on St James's Gardens will proceed following the exhumation and reburial of many of the bodies buried across the Gardens and following removal of the remaining monuments and tombstones.** The monuments and tombstones served to evoke the life of the Gardens as a burial ground (1790-1853) and provided a highly valued connection to the rich history and heritage of the Euston area, of which many people in the area are rightly proud.
- **The decline and planned loss of Euston Square Gardens, with many mature and fine trees providing cover, severs an important link for local people to the history of the Square, and its central place in the community.**

Inadequate and unsecured compensation

Compensation for disturbance and loss of amenities during construction is insufficiently

protected: Coopers Lane TRA Community Garden, secured by local residents as compensation for many years of air, noise and light pollution and dust entering their homes from the construction of CTRL (Channel Tunnel Railway Link), is now to be lost as a result of CIP (Central Somers Town). The planned loss of this private shared garden (and its replacement with a public open space of indeterminate quality) is unfair and unjust. There is a legitimate expectation amongst local people that this well-tended, and regularly used, community garden was theirs to keep, as a hard won 'reward' for their persistence and strength in confronting CTRL about the many and unacceptable disturbances and impacts arising from the St Pancras development over a seven year period.

- **'Compensation' for the loss of trees, felled to make way for HS2 development, is grossly inadequate and unfairly located in parts of Camden other than the Euston area:** planting of saplings elsewhere in the borough cannot possibly compensate sufficiently for the loss of a diversity of mature trees in this area, which already lacks greenery and tree and plant life.
- **Lack of a financial compensation scheme for the 1,300 households in Euston that qualify for noise insulation from HS2.** On 16 December 2016, the House of Lords made a strong recommendation that compensation schemes, including

the Voluntary Purchase Scheme, Owner-Occupier Cash Option and Lump Sum to Residential Tenants, should cover Euston households. Despite the commencement of early works, details of a construction compensation scheme for Euston are not yet available.

Poor consultation, communication and accountability

- **Consultation processes for CIP (Central Somers Town) have been criticised as flawed** due to a lack of clarity about the consequences of the planned rebuilding of a local school and nursery, in particular the loss of open green space to make way for a tower of private housing. Consultation on this point also failed to differentiate between responses from local residents and people with far less attachment to the area, for example commuters and visitors. The scale of the tower was unclear, with early consultation referring to a 10-storey tower, compared to current plans for 25 storeys.
- **In retrospect, consultation and communication with CTRL was relatively good, at least** following a public inquiry about CTRL's working practices. Construction work had been carried on for 24 hours a day but, following the inquiry recommendations, the works were made subject to control by local people and a hotline and drop in sessions at the Tenants and Residents Association Community Hall were set up to further improve communication between local

people and the developer. The provision of Coopers Lane TRA Community Garden provides an example of a positive outcome for the community from development in the area, making its planned loss (to make way for private housing development) even harder to bear.

- **There has been, and continues to be, a lack of clarity about which authority, or developer is responsible for a development, associated works, and the ensuing impacts:** this creates difficulties for local residents who wish to complain about certain activities or hardships arising from a development project.
- **Local people express a sense of 'helplessness' and 'hopelessness' about the scale and nature of development in the area:** although there exist plenty of opportunities for consultation and making submissions and representations, there is a strong sense that the views of local people are 'simply not heard' when these oppose the interests of business, private developers and economic development.

Procedural flaws and inadequacies

- **Local people are increasingly 'losing faith' in a local planning system in which Camden Council operates as developer, landowner and decision maker;** this combining of functions is considered to prevent adequate 'checks and balances'.

- **Overlooking role of independent experts:** the independent peer review, commissioned by Camden Town District Management Committee, of the Air Quality Assessment supporting the planning application for CIP (Central Somers Town), raised fundamental questions about key methodological approaches and conclusions in the AQA. Although submitted in a timely manner, Camden Council did not consider this independent review.
- **A narrow and limited approach to environmental assessment characterises decision making on development in the Euston area, especially the CIP (Central Somers Town).** There is a strong argument that the particular social and environmental conditions in Somers Town and the Euston area more generally (high numbers of elderly and disabled people and children with vulnerabilities) and cumulative nature of the impacts warranted a fuller use of this decision making tool, in terms of detailed environmental impact assessment, equalities assessment and health impact assessment. These conditions also suggest strongly the need for a full local open space survey.

Unequal burdens and benefits of development

- **The great burden of pollution, loss of open green space, and amenities falls unfairly on elderly and disabled people who are more**

susceptible to poor health conditions and are likely to have greater difficulty moving around an area criss-crossed with building works, and with changes to walkways and reduced and altered disabled parking bays, and bus routes and stops.

- **There is also considerable concern on the part of local people about the adverse and damaging impacts of these environmental problems (especially poor air quality and the loss of open green spaces) on the physical and mental health and welfare of children and young people.** A real concern is that there are generations of children growing up with unacceptable levels of noise, disturbance and social upheaval.
- **There is a strong sense that the major developments in the Euston area (the availability of luxury housing, investment in transport infrastructure) are for the benefit of those living outside the area,** such as commuters, whilst the burden of these developments falls, unfairly, on those living within the area, the majority of whom are unable to move away.

Seriousness of spatial and temporal cumulative effects of development on the area

- **An extraordinarily large number of development projects have taken place concurrently and consecutively - seemingly without interruption - over a very long**

period in the Euston area. When viewed collectively, and over time, this conglomeration of major and smaller-scale development has produced a storm of negative and significant impacts, meted and felt by local people throughout this area.

The lack of account taken of the ***cumulative*** effects of developments has caused particularly harmful levels of air pollution in the locality. In addition, the very long-term nature of pollution and disturbances to everyday life has created stresses and strains having detrimental effects on people's mental and physical health. The decline and loss of green spaces has exacerbated these negative effects of intense development in the area, whereas such spaces had provided necessary 'breathing spaces' and 'green lungs', as described by local people. **Planners, developers, and decision makers should take seriously *both the spatial and temporal nature of cumulative impacts* on the quality of life of local people and the quality of the local environment as a matter of environmental justice.**



'Yarn bombing' in Euston Square Gardens to draw attention to planned felling of mature trees.