WHO is Spreading Rumours?

Keep Osterley Green's Response to innuendo by the Nishkam Schools Trust

Why can't we have an open and honest debate? The residents' group Keep Osterley Green (KOG) has been put in the position of dealing with allegations about (anonymous) rumours. The allegations were made by Liz Fitzgerald of Vincent and Gorbing on behalf of the Nishkam Schools Trust (NST) in an email of 1st September to all councillors

That email, which invited councillors to attend a Q&A session at the Osterley Hotel regarding the proposed Nishkam school in Syon Lane, contained the following:

The session is designed to assist in understanding the proposed development and the recent amendments submitted and answer any questions that people may have, as we are aware that rumours are spreading, which are not all are factually correct.(Emphasis added)

Note the vague accusation “rumours are spreading” and the failure to name the source.

KOG does not deal in rumours. The residents in KOG have given up a great deal of their time to research the school application. They have produced detailed documents, one of which you have received. The results of our work are clearly displayed on our website for all to see.

This is not about rumours. It is about a submission which is so deeply flawed and the case for refusal so strong that NST has, late in the day, employed a PR company to try and reverse the tide of local opinion opposed to the school. So why, instead of naming us and dealing with our materials, did the NST choose to make vague references to “rumours” from unidentified people?

The five “rumours” according to the NST

| “Rumour” No.1 | Replacement Metropolitan Open Land. It has been suggested that we are required to provide replacement MOL if we are to develop on this land. There is no policy requirement for replacement MOL to be provided. (Emphasis added) |

KOG's reply.

(a) National Planning Policy Framework, paragraph 74

Existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless:

• an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or

• the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the needs for which clearly outweigh the loss.

KOG comment. This site is not only MOL but also defined as Publicly Accessible Open Space in the Hounslow UDP. Policies which apply to Open Land clearly also apply to MOL.

(b) The London Plan

POLICY 7.18 PROTECTING OPEN SPACE AND ADDRESSING DEFICIENCY
Planning decisions … (B) The loss of protected open spaces must be resisted unless equivalent or better quality provision is made within the local catchment area. Replacement of one type of open space with another is unacceptable unless an up to date needs assessment shows that this would be appropriate.

(c) The Hounslow Local Plan

Policy GB2 - Open Space. We will expect development proposals to

(g) Protect existing Local Open Space from development, especially where it would lead to a deficiency in publicly accessible open space, unless it satisfies the criteria for such development in the NPPF in that: it has been assessed as clearly surplus to requirements; or it would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in a suitable location; or the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the need for which clearly outweighs the loss;

Also as set out in Statutory Instrument 2015/595, local planning authorities are required to consult Sport England on any planning application for development affecting playing field land.

(d) Sport England, Policy Exception E4

The playing field or playing fields, which would be lost as a result of the proposed development, would be replaced by a playing field or playing fields of an equivalent or better quality and of equivalent or greater quantity, in a suitable location and subject to equivalent or better management arrangements, prior to the commencement of development.

“Rumour” No.2 Many have stated that there are no or limited Sikh’ in the area and as such a Sikh school is not required. The school is a multi-faith school, with a Sikh ethos. In addition, Sikh is the 4th largest religion in Hounslow (ONS Census Data 2011) and the 5th largest religion in the Osterley and Spring Grove ward.

KOG’s reply

No one has ever said that there are no Sikhs in the area.

Instead of this unclear waffle NST could have quoted from our documents. What we have clearly said is that the number of Sikhs in the area around the School is relatively low (compared, for example to central Hounslow). We have further pointed out that not all Sikhs want to send their children to a Sikh school preferring the wider population mix in a non-denominational school.

According to the 2011 census, the Sikh population is as follows

- Osterley 11.8%, Isleworth 2.4%, Brentford 1.4%, Syon 1.9%. Average = 4.3%
- Heston East 27.4%, Heston Central 23.2%, Hounslow West 17.4% Cranford 20.9%.
- Ealing: Norwood Green 26.1%, Southall Broadway 31.0%, Southall Green 39.4%.

It is the percentages of Sikhs that matters and not the numerical ranking of the religions. To say that Sikhs are the fifth most numerous religion in a ward tells us nothing about the actual numbers.

Finally on population, the NST’s own data shows the low level of demand from the area in which the school is placed. Of 857 expressions of interest used in evidence of demand in 2012 only 29 were from a TW7 or TW8 postcode.

It is very difficult to resist the conclusion that the proposed school is in the wrong area - if it is to serve the local community as Nishkam claim.
KOG's reply

No one, and certainly not KOG, says that the Sequential Test is flawed because the site was “identified” in 2012. KOG says that the Sequential Test is flawed for a whole series of reasons. One of those reasons that Nishkam did a lot more than “identify” the site prior to the Sequential Test. It spent money on various site investigations made by a series of companies throughout 2012 to 2014 (phase 1 survey, arboricultural survey, geo-environmental desk study, tree survey, acoustic survey). All this was prior to the completion of the Nishkam Sequential Site Assessment. This looks to us like more than an “indication” of a preferred site.

Further, KOG says that the Analysis is flawed because it used a land area requirement which included 2400 m$^2$ for a nursery. The nursery is not part of the application and therefore its area should not have been included in the site search. We could go on to deal with the absurd nature of many of the sites “researched” as a possible location for the school (e.g. West Middlesex Hospital, Mogden Sewage works) and the perfunctory nature of reasons given for rejecting many possible sites. For detail on these and other flaws with the analysis, please see the materials on our website.

If we were to believe Nishkam's claim that building on open land is the only possibility for providing extra school provision on the scale proposed then we would have to conclude that all future schools of a similar scale will have to go on open land thereby consistently eroding the amount of open space, contrary to planning guidelines at every level.

If the difficulty of finding a site for an all-through school is really such that it has to be built on Metropolitan Open Land far from the majority of the intended pupils (average distance travelled by primary children to the present temporary Nishkam school is 3.84 km) then it would make more sense to build two separate but connected schools one primary and one secondary in different but close locations. Further, the NPPF requires applicants to demonstrate flexibility when assessing a site, ie could the development be disaggregated. This possibility is never mentioned in the Nishkam material.

KOG's reply

Invest Hounslow is a website aimed at attracting inward investment into Hounslow. It displays information on properties which are suitable for various forms of development (e.g. residential, educational, retail …). Nishkam appears to believe that Hounslow puts information on its Invest Hounslow website regardless of availability. This would certainly be a bizarre way of trying to
attract investors. Moreover it would conflict with the message on the website from Brendon Walsh (Director of Regeneration, Economic Development and Environment, London Borough of Hounslow) who is quoted on the website as follows

*The message to investors is a simple one: Hounslow remains a great place to invest and my team is tasked to facilitate development so they will do everything they can to enable a smooth process through planning and into delivery. Contact us to find out how we can help your business to relocate, or help you to develop in the borough.*

Would you expect a Council keen to get investment in its area to put up a website to encourage investment by showing development opportunities irrespective of actual availability? No one would expect that and a brief telephone call to the person responsible for the website confirmed that the properties listed on the website are put there because they are investment opportunities. A site that is not available is clearly not an investment opportunity.

One just has to ask what kind of investment website would indicate investment opportunities when they are not actually available?

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**“Rumour” No.5** Location based on Educational Need. Much has been stated about the proposal not intending to provide for the ward in which it is situated. This is not the case, there is no restriction on where admissions come from for a free school and given the ethnic split within the ward and adjacent wards, it is anticipated that, in due course, as admissions progress and the school becomes established, that it will serve the local population more so than those further afield. This has been seen at other Nishkam Schools.

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**KOG’s reply**

The relevant facts on this are given above in our response to “rumour” No.2. How much sense does it make to place a school which prioritises admission for children for Sikh families in an area of low Sikh population density?

The present temporary Sikh school overwhelmingly has children from Sikh families and that is hardly surprising to anyone.

The interest expressed in the School has overwhelmingly come from outside the area in which the proposed school would be located.

The consequence of the above is that the 700 children for the proposed primary part of the school would come from outside the area and would be travelling, on average, close to 4km to get to school. National and local policy is that primary schools should be within walking distance.

The need to travel around 4km will generate a large amount of private car transport, despite whatever travel plans are proposed. Everyone knows this. Not only that but increasing travel distance, especially to primary schools, is well-known to operate as a form of covert social selection. Those parents with the time and the means will feel more in a position to send their children to a school so far beyond walking distance.

Out of the seven free schools approved in Hounslow, three are in Brentford Priority Admissions Area for schools (HIP, Green School for Boys, Floreat Brentford). These have been requested by the Brentford and Isleworth community and will be built in Brentford and Isleworth. A fourth school may be in TW5/7 (Edison Primary).

The need for places is borough wide and should be provided throughout the borough to meet that demand.