

**UNISON response to
Accommodation Options
Review (AOR) and to
Locality Strategy Options
(LSO)
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UNISON Response

Summary

- 1) The cost to Barnet Council of £50million on this project without having fully secured or identified the associated resources needed elsewhere in the Borough to make it workable presents as foolhardy as the decision to sell off Mill Hill depot without having secured an alternative.
- 2) High numbers of colleagues working at the NLBP and Barnet House sites use their cars both for getting to work (78% according to our survey) and for carrying out their work duties (64%).
- 3) There are critical risks to the Council with respect to being able to continue operating effectively and safely if a wholesale move to Colindale goes ahead.
- 4) It is not clear how the assessment of business delivery has arrived at the conclusion it has for the Locality Strategy Options (LSO).
- 5) The Accommodation Options Review report (AOR) is missing critical information which Councillors need to make a sensible decision about whether or not to proceed to approve the construction of the Colindale site.

Background

Barnet is an outer London Borough with good public transport links going from north to south but with extremely poor east to west transport links. A typical journey across the borough by bus takes one hour. The proposals before this committee are to build council office space in Colindale which:

- **has poor access routes across the Borough;**
- **is known to be able to house less than half the number of staff we have in Barnet House and NLBP both in the Council and in partner organisations;**
- **commit to “smarter working” without fully understanding how this is functioning now and without the infrastructure in place to support this;**
- **commit to Council staff using alternative space in a variety of venues without any understanding as how practical or feasible this is, including no synchronisation of the plans for libraries with the plans outlined here;**
- **commit the Council to spending £50million without realising any savings for 50 years (even if it works).**

London Borough of Barnet (LBB) has seen many changes over a very short period of time. This has included significant reductions in staff numbers and over 20 TUPE transfers (excluding TUPE transfers of staff from schools to Academies). There have been reports to the various Council Committees which have received approval for developing plans for the further outsourcing of all remaining staff except for those in the Commissioning teams.

This is very unsettling for staff still employed by LBB and there are now **serious recruitment and retention problems not only across the whole Council, but also for our “partner” organisations such as Barnet Group, CSG and RE.** This is being felt most acutely in staff areas where clients are at extreme risk. Agency staff now make up some 40% of social workers in Family services and over 20% of social

workers in Adults services. Recruitment campaign after recruitment campaign is not yielding positive responses by attracting new colleagues. The risks to maintaining safe working are already high in these services both in terms of the current workforce and for service users. Therefore any **additional loss of experienced staff to these services could be catastrophic**. Most of these colleagues work from the North London Business Park or Barnet House. This knowledge deficit is true of staff groups working for the other partners.

Barnet UNISON conducted a survey over just 7.5 working days on members in both of these settings. We were responding to anecdotal evidence that colleagues are anxious about any prospective move to Colindale. In this very short time we received 219 responses which is unusually high and confirms that this issue is, indeed, worrying a large number of colleagues.

This survey showed that 28.5% of current colleagues would have to stop working for Barnet if their workplace became Colindale. 35% of colleagues are actively looking for new jobs now.

An overwhelming majority of colleagues (78%) use their car to get to work and 64% use their car in carrying out their work duties. After the proposed move to Colindale 76% will need to use their car to get to work and 61% will still need to use their car to carry out their duties. 71% responded that the move to Colindale will lengthen their journey to work (this last response includes those using public transport and those using their cars to get to work).

This indicates that the move to Colindale will be hugely disruptive for colleagues in terms of their attendance at work and has **serious operational implications** in terms of carrying out business on behalf of the employer if there are not adequate parking arrangements at the Colindale site.

It should be noted this survey focussed questions on those using public transport to get to work and those using cars. We acknowledge that there are colleagues who use their bicycles and motorcycles to get to work and so additional surveys would need to be carried out to capture their anxieties with respect to the move to Colindale. **There is too much missing information in the report** for Councillors to approve the construction of the offices in Colindale:

- **No detail with respect to the fit of numbers of staff and volume of public accessing the space against the size of the spaces themselves.**
- **No mention of disability access to the site in Colindale either for workers or for residents needing to visit the local offices.**
- **No completed study on office utilisation.**
- **No completed study on the current way in which “smarter working” has been taken up (pros and cons), nor a study as to how this is likely to be achieved in the future.**

Committing the Council to this decision with such poor information risks repeating a similarly disastrous situation we have with the relocation of operations from Mill Hill depot. In this case it would mean a loss of experienced staff and the inability of services to perform effectively due to lack of access to any, or only poor, office space as well as poor access to some of the communities we serve.

We note that in the LSO report there is much mention of the use of libraries to accommodate the displaced staff. In particular North Finchley, Chipping Barnet, Burnt Oak and Golders Green are very much the preferred venues and **yet these libraries will themselves lose respectively 67%, 13%, 51% and 58% of space available to them as part of the plan for libraries agreed by the CELS committee earlier this year.** There is absolutely no clear plan for how the space vacated by the library will be used although some of it is to be used commercially.

In addition the reduction in staffed hours of the libraries mean they will not be available to be used safely by other council staff members.

Risks

- 1) The Council commits itself to a costly albatross when the chance to secure more sustainable and cheaper options may present themselves.
- 2) There is a high risk that experienced colleagues will leave Barnet in the next 2 years as a direct consequence of confirmation that their workplace is moving from NLBP and Barnet House to Colindale.
- 3) As a result of large numbers of experienced staff leaving their jobs, the **Council will be exposed to serious further risks in terms of managing critical services** to the public.
- 4) Without sufficient provision of parking spaces services to the public are at risk of being undermined by moving large numbers of work colleagues to Colindale as over half of these colleagues use their car to carry out their work duties.
- 5) High risk of a repeat of the Mill Hill depot scenario where, in the realisation the Council has critical services to provide but has not planned to accommodate the operations around this, it is forced to enter into costly and inefficient solutions.
- 6) There is a risk the Council will no longer meet its obligations under the Equality Act if it is unable to provide adequate access to disabled workers and residents to its buildings.

Recommendation

- 1) This committee postpones making a decision until full information has been provided with respect to the answers to questions raised here around disability access; current office utilisation; a study on “smarter working” to date; the genuine feasibility of the usage of the alternative sites identified for the purposes stated.
- 2) The lease for Barnet House continues until 2032. This gives this committee the chance to take stock of its situation with respect to the Colindale site and to see how the vote to leave the EU will affect the local economy and house prices more generally. This is not the time to make such a costly decision which we can all too easily predict we will regret.