

GOVERNMENT MARKS ITS OWN HOMEWORK. APPROVES APPLICATION TO BUILD HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL AND UNDERGROUND LEARNING CENTRE IN VICTORIA TOWER GARDENS NEXT TO PARLIAMENT

The Thorney Island Society supports the Save Victoria Tower Gardens Campaign (SVTG) in condemning the decision to build on a rare riverside open space and compromise the setting of the Westminster UNESCO-protected World Heritage Site. The decision gives the go-ahead to build on any historic public park.



Sue Ball, Chair of The Thorney Island Society says:-

“Thorney Island is arguably the densest concentration of “history” anywhere in the country and maybe in

Europe being the seat of government, administration and religion (Westminster Abbey) with an ancient

school (Westminster) and fine remains of Westminster Hall and the Jewel Tower dating from the time when

the Houses of Parliament was a royal palace”.

The full SVTG press release follows:

CAMPAIGNERS CONDEMN MINISTER'S DECISION AS A 'DISSERVICE TO HOLOCAUST EDUCATION' – as Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre project is approved

Save Victoria Tower Gardens Press Release 29/7/21

Save Victoria Tower Gardens (SVTG) condemns the decision by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to proceed with its proposal to build a £100m + Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre occupying a significant area of green space in a small central London park, Victoria Tower Gardens (VTG).

Baroness Ruth Deech said:- *"The decision to approve the current proposals for a Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre, is divisive. Last autumn's public inquiry raised serious concerns about the plans' impact on heritage and a valuable public park, as well as raising issues of flood risk, security and damage to mature trees.*

We passionately believe that the Holocaust should be remembered, but we believe that this ill-considered and damaging proposal will do a disservice to victims and survivors, and little to enhance understanding and respect."

Housing Minister, Chris Pincher MP, announced today (29 July 2021) that the government will proceed with its plan to construct a Holocaust Memorial and underground Learning Centre in VTG, next to Parliament. The Planning Application for this project was submitted in 2019 to Westminster City Council in the name of Robert Jenrick MP, the Secretary of State in Mr Pincher's department (MHCLG).

A 6-week Planning Inquiry took place in late 2020 after the planning application was called in from Westminster City Council at the last minute by MHCLG [1]. The Planning Inspector's report was sent to Chris Pincher in April and was only published yesterday.

SVTG's campaign has been gathering strength since the project was first put forward for Victoria Tower Gardens by David Cameron and Andrew Feldman in January 2016. The site had originally not been included among the fifty locations selected for consideration by Government advisers [2].

Subsequently, objections to the location have been raised by Westminster City Council, the Royal Parks, ICOMOS and leading Jewish commentators.

The main objections to the proposal:

- multiple breaches of planning policies, especially those protecting open space
- serious risk of flooding into an entirely subterranean building
- reduction and overcrowding of VTG as a local amenity including, among other things, compromising a vital children's playground
- heritage impacts, including endangering the World Heritage status of the Westminster World Heritage Site
- security and pedestrian flow issues, due to the need for heavy security in a public park
- the severe conflict of interest involved in MHCLG being proposer, judge and jury on its own pet proposal

While Westminster City Council has recognised the importance of the project, in January 2020 its Planning Committee unanimously opposed the application, citing concerns about all the above issues except the last [3].

The Royal Parks have stated that they fear Victoria Tower Gardens, a rare riverside open space in Central London, will become a civic space, and that the mature plane trees that border the park will be put at risk by the deep excavation required to construct an underground learning centre [4].

ICOMOS, the body which advises UNESCO on cultural heritage, has strongly opposed the government's plan on the grounds that it would have an adverse impact on the Outstanding Universal Value of this WHS, and would compromise the immediate setting and views [5]. UNESCO recently stripped Liverpool of its World Heritage status [6], and we understand that construction of the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre in this location would put the Westminster WHS at similar risk.

The Environment Agency has imposed stringent conditions aimed at mitigating the risk of breach flooding at the site, which is just a few metres from the Thames river wall [7]. They also observed that as it is entirely underground the proposed building *'does not have a safe means of access and egress in the event of flooding.'* Recent flash flooding in London has demonstrated the vulnerability of underground spaces to unexpected environmental events and also the danger of hard surfacing green sites [8].

Although the project is supported by the leaders of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and prominent figures including Gerald Ronson and Lord Polak [9], it has deeply divided the Jewish community. Holocaust educator Trudy Gold and Baroness Deech have both challenged the assertion that Holocaust Memorials combat antisemitism, and raised concern that this prominent memorial might even fuel antisemitism [10]. The former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Lord Carlile, has raised serious concerns about security risk [11]. Others, including Holocaust survivor Anita Wallfisch, Rabbi Aaron Goldstein, many Jewish peers and over 40 Holocaust academics [12] have questioned the educational value of a such a tiny learning centre when the War Museum (IWM), with its comprehensive brand new Holocaust galleries, is less than one mile away [13].

Helen Monger, Director of London Gardens Trust, said: *'This decision sets an appalling precedent for the desecration of parks and heritage by giving the green light to building on an historic public park and on the setting of the Westminster UNESCO-protected World Heritage Site. It also ignores the vital importance of green spaces to Londoners' wellbeing, as demonstrated during the pandemic, and the effects of climate change, plus the manifest problems of flooding, energy consumption and air pollution in our cities.'*

The government has pledged £75m towards the £102m project, with the balance due to come from private donors. It is unknown how much has been raised privately to date, but over £12m has already been spent by MHCLG without scrutiny, including recent tendering for significant contracts and advertising for staff recruitment before the grant of planning permission [14].

The conflicts of interest inherent in the project [15] are yet another controversy for Robert Jenrick's department, following the scandals surrounding Westferry Printworks and the Jockey Club.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Save Victoria Tower Gardens is a campaign which unites local people and environmentalists, and Jewish and non-Jewish people concerned about the nature of the project's educational proposals and its destruction of parkland.

The £100m + Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre is a building combining a memorial consisting of 23 bronze fins atop a large grass mound in the middle of VTG, obstructing the iconic view of Parliament, with an underground learning centre dug out eight metres underground under the mound, designed to contain an almost entirely digital record of the Jewish Holocaust and other holocausts.

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Sources

[1] The Government “called in” the planning application before Westminster Council could reject it: <https://www.theplanner.co.uk/news/mcvey-calls-in-holocaust-memorial-having-already-attempted-to-rig-the-public-consultation>: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/consultant-big-ideas-accused-of-rigging-decision-on-holocaust-memorial-site-fpmfkwkv>

[2] The Government has admitted the announcement came only two weeks after the Holocaust Memorial Foundation’s board first considered Victoria Tower Gardens as a location. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2019-06-12/263702>

The site was not one of the 50 locations that the Government had asked the property experts at CRBE to evaluate: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2019-06-27/270267>

That was because it was too small to meet almost any of the criteria specified for the site which included a lecture theatre and space for events for 500 people: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459046/National_Memorial_and_Learning_Centre.pdf

[3] Westminster Council’s Planning Committee concluded that the proposal was an inappropriate form of development for the proposed location https://idoxpa.westminster.gov.uk/online-applications/files/EE9AF5A6638F48F3F37C484CFD600D23/pdf/19_00114_FULL-SUB_COMMITTEE_REPORT-6315517.pdf

[4] The Royal Parks says Centre could have: “a significant harmful impact”: see evidence dated 8 February 2019: https://idoxpa.westminster.gov.uk/online-applications/files/408F1CD4148B9005ABCB802AE77FD53C/pdf/19_00114_FULL-THE_ROYAL_PARKS-5827776.pdf

[5] UNESCO’s adviser on World Heritage Sites (ICOMOS) warns of a “*massive visual impact*”: see page 4 of ‘International Council on Monuments & Sites’ evidence, dated 15 February 2019: <https://idoxpa.westminster.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=PL0CVYRP27000> [6] Liverpool loses World Heritage Status <https://news.sky.com/story/liverpool-stripped-of-unesco-world-heritage-status-as-anger-breeds-over-incomprehensible-move-12360530>

[7] The Environment Agency withdrew its objections but imposed stringent conditions <https://idoxpa.westminster.gov.uk/online->

[applications/files/7B05682BADD2B498BDFF1506A6A51330/pdf/19_00114_FU_LL-ENVIRONMENT_AGENCY-6245298.pdf](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-57816647) [8] Flash floods hit London in July 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-57816647>

[9] Lord Feldman wrote as Conservative Party chairman to lobby for Victoria Tower Gardens to be the site of the memorial (although not the learning centre): https://www.westminster.gov.uk/sites/default/files/14.4_vtg_feldman_1.pdf

Gerald Ronson was one of the two members of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation's property sub-committee: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2019-10-02/293453> Lord Polak is a trustee of The Holocaust Memorial Charitable Trust <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5128606/trustees>

Marie van der Zyl, president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews accepted that the site could be terrorist target, but supports the location: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/westminster-is-the-right-place-for-a-holocaust-memorial-b3sm87qws>

[10] Trudy Gold and Baroness Deech oppose the plan <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/a-more-fitting-memorial-to-the-holocaust>

and https://www.westminster.gov.uk/sites/default/files/cd_5.26_baroness_deech_statement_of_case_with_appendices.pdf

[11] The former Government adviser on terrorism legislation Lord Carlile described it as a “trophy site” for terrorists: see document “CD 8.43 Proof of Evidence of Lord Carlile” on “Inquiry documents” tab at: <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/holocaust-memorial-inquiry-documents>

[12] Jewish commentators oppose site:

- Eight Jewish Peers wrote a letter to The Times objecting to the location: [Eight Jewish peers: Shoah memorial 'evokes neither Holocaust nor Jewish history' | Jewish News \(timesofisrael.com\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/eight-jewish-peers-shoah-memorial-evokes-neither-holocaust-nor-jewish-history/)

- David Aaronovitch in The Times criticised the design and location: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/david-aaronovitch-the-westminster-holocaust-memorial-doesnt-hit-me-in-my-heart-97765wdc5>

- Geoffrey Alderman in the Spectator said: ‘Britain doesn’t need another holocaust memorial’: <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2019/05/britain-doesnt-need-another-holocaust-memorial/>

- Baroness Ruth Deech “constant conflation of opposition to this memorial with antisemitism is politicising the project” <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/times-letters-prison-places-redesign-and-rehabilitation-bblqvjj2>

- Tanya Gold in the Telegraph said: ‘The Westminster Holocaust Memorial is the wrong memorial in the wrong place’: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/westminster-holocaust-memorial-wrong-memorial-wrong-place/>

- Rabbi Aaron Goldstein writes in Jewish News “I believe the money would be better spent... educating future generations of Britons.” <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/progressively-speaking-why-do-we-need-a-permanent-shoah-in-westminster/>

- Melanie Phillips in the Jewish Chronicle criticised the purpose and aesthetic of Learning Centre: <https://www.thejc.com/comment/columnists/this-giant-toast-rack-wont-help-us-fight-hate-1.486125>

- also former Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams describes proposed building as a fig-leaf: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/holocaust-memorial-is-fig-leaf-in-antisemitism-debate-says-williams-d87hdgscr>

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch told Rowan Moore that the proposal would be ‘an unbelievable amount of stupid money spent on what, exactly?’ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/dec/27/holocaust-survivor-anita-lasker-wallfisch-uk-holocaust-memorial-learning-centre>

A group of 42 Holocaust academics said that siting the Government’s proposed learning centre next to Parliament risks creating a “celebratory narrative” of Britain’s response to the Holocaust: https://www.westminster.gov.uk/sites/default/files/10.36_westminster_inquiry-final-appx5990v193240661.pdf

[13] New IWM Holocaust galleries to open in October 2021 <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/05/second-world-war-and-holocaust-galleries-to-open-at-iwm-in-october/#>

[14] As at February 2021 £12.9m had already been spent on the Holocaust Memorial and education programme <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-02-03/h112937> Invitations to tender have been published <https://ted.europa.eu/udl?uri=TED:NOTICE:376006-2020:TEXT:EN:HTML> and <https://ted.europa.eu/udl?uri=TED:NOTICE:114779-2020:TEXT:EN:HTML>

[15] The Government is acting as both applicant and decision maker: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/09/09/housing-secretary-has-conflict-interest-plans-holocaust-memorial/>

Website: www.SaveVictoriaTowerGardens.co.uk

Fundraising: <https://www.crowdjustice.com/case/save-victoria-tower-gardens/> (or via our Website, directly to The Thorney Island Society)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/SaveVTG/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/savevtg?lang=en>

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