

Save Wornington College

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'Wornington college' is the North Kensington site of Kensington and Chelsea College (KCC), the other main site being at Hortensia Road, a turning off the Kings Road. It stands in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC).

On 21/11/17 skills minister Anne Milton held a meeting with members of the 'Save Wornington College' campaign. As a result of this and the campaign's lobbying of the FE Commissioner Richard Atkins, Milton wrote on 12/12/17 to the KCC governors detailing a recommendation made at her instigation by Atkins: that they should 'pause' till the end of April 2018 a vote on the proposed merger between KCC and Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College (EHWLC) that they were due to take on 18/12/17. This would allow Atkins to conduct during January 2018 'a further diagnostic assessment to consider [KCC's] financial position'. On 18/12/17 the governors accepted this recommendation.

This decision results from two factors: the fallout from the slaughter of working-class people at the nearby Grenfell Tower and the powerful grassroots mobilisation conducted by the 'Save Wornington College' campaign. It means that the campaigners have won an important battle.

As far back as October 2012, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) issued a Notice of Concern about KCC as a whole, while in that year, and again in 2013, Ofsted gave KCC a 'requires improvement' rating, covering, among other things, governance arrangements. A new principal, Mark Brickley, took over in September 2013. Nevertheless, Ofsted issued a third 'requires improvement' verdict in 2015. (Yet another would be issued in 2017.)

Following massive government cuts to FE funding in 2015-16, the SFA began to put pressure on colleges everywhere to engage in Area Reviews intended to lead to mergers, and in the case of KCC this involved a recommendation to merge with the City Literary Institute (City Lit.), an arrangement that would arguably have helped to safeguard the central role of the Wornington site as a provider of lifelong learning for working-class adults in the vicinity, a very high proportion of whom have to contend with institutional and other forms of racism and/or xenophobia.

In April 2016 a RBKC Cabinet Key Decision Report came to light, revealing that the KCC building at

Wornington Road was scheduled for demolition. This would allow a private developer to build housing on the site, accompanied by an unspecified provision for 'education' that would at best offer less than 30 per cent of the current Wornington building's usable space. Against a background of further financial difficulties for the college, the freehold of the Wornington site was then (August 2016) sold to RKBC Council under a leaseback arrangement for £25.4m.

In the week beginning 4/11/16 Brickley resigned with immediate effect, citing 'personal reasons'. (These may or may not have included the £60,000 spent by the college on his eight overseas trips.)

In February 2017, KCC governor and former RBKC director of strategy and local services Tony Redpath wrote to the Council warning that 'KCC's problem, put baldly, is that its attraction to other colleges is based on its assets rather than its activities'. (This was the more telling in that between 16/2/16 and 3/10/16 - ie the period during which the site was sold to the Council - Redpath had taken a 'sabbatical' from the KCC governing body.)

For reasons that are not yet clear, the merger with the City Lit. recommended by the SFA fell through, and in June 2017, supported by KCC chair of governors and recently retired UCAS CEO, Mary Curnock Cook, interim principal Elaine McMahon announced instead the plan for KCC to merge with (ie be taken over and asset-stripped by) EHWLC. Moreover, on 1/9/17, deterred neither by the 'Save Wornington College Campaign' nor by the spotlight thrown on both RBKC Council and KCC management by the Grenfell disaster, McMahon, Cook and the governing body launched the obligatory public consultation on this plan, to end on 30/9/17, with 2/1/18 as the target date for 'completion' - that is, for the merger itself.

As indicated at the outset, this process has now been stalled. That has been achieved by the mobilisation - and to a large extent by the self-organisation - of members of a working-class community whose life chances depend on continued access to valid post-compulsory education. This is a struggle with far-reaching implications which our side can win.