

Dear NDF member,

The murals on the Thameslink bridge on West End Lane have been the subject of much comment and debate over the last few weeks. Two of the West Hampstead councillors recently published a statement on a proposed way forward. We set out the NDF's response to that statement below, together with the original statement.

Best wishes,

Keith and Nick

Keith Moffitt and Nick Jackson

Co-Chairs

Fortune Green and West Hampstead Neighbourhood Development Forum

**Fortune Green and West Hampstead Neighbourhood Development Forum
Response to West Hampstead Councillors' Statement on Thameslink Bridge
Murals**

General

The NDF believe that it is a matter for great regret that at a time when the pandemic has led to a greater sense of community in West Hampstead, with people helping their neighbours and in many cases getting to know neighbours for the first time, this issue has been so divisive.

We recognise that many local people consider that the murals have considerable artistic merit. However, we firmly believe that *Through Arts We Rise* were wrong in creating this artwork in the heart of West Hampstead without any consultation whatsoever with the local community. We are also extremely disappointed that Network Rail saw fit to give permission without any effort to ascertain how the local community would like to see this space used. The West Hampstead community has a strong tradition of valuing consultation and trying to achieve a consensus.

We recognise that you as councillors have worked hard to identify a solution to an issue where there are strongly held and often opposing views. We congratulate you on trying to find a way forward that is acceptable to the community as a whole, and think that your proposal has a lot to recommend it. However, we note from emails we are continuing to receive that not everyone is happy with your proposal.

Some of the concerns expressed to us related to the personal reputation of the artist, others were about John Henderson who is portrayed in one of the murals, and others again were about the lack of consideration for the safety of local people by creating the murals during lockdown when only essential work was permitted by the government, and without adequate social distancing. We are relaying these comments to you here, but will not comment on them, as they are not planning issues.

The way forward

We welcome the concept of periodic changes of artwork on the bridge, and the proposal to consult the local community about what kind of artwork should be displayed.

Your statement says *“Post-lockdown, a new, apolitical, local community group will be convened to meet, consider and decide on the next artwork.”* Deciding who will be a part of such a group will be absolutely vital if there is to be a local consensus. We think that members should be strictly impartial and that no artists or art organisations likely to have their work featured on the bridge should form part of the group. It might be helpful to contact the organisers of the London Mural Festival 2020 in this context, <https://www.londonmurfestival.com>, and the Lewisham School of Muralism <https://www.spacehive.com/lewisham-school-of-muralism>.

We hope that it will be possible to convene the group, virtually if necessary, before too long so that the present artwork does not become a semi-permanent feature, which could have not only planning implications but also impact on the local community's acceptance of your proposal.

While we realise that many members of our community are concerned about social issues such as domestic violence, homelessness and BLM, we have picked up quite a strong message that in these very difficult and often depressing times, many local residents would in the short term at least prefer any artwork to be more uplifting, and perhaps, as you suggest, in the form of “*artwork by local school children, or just ... a beautiful landscape with some trees painted on*”. We in fact understand that there is legal precedent that any specific promotion of social and political causes risks counting as advertisement, to which planning rules apply.

Planning issues

As a statutory consultee with a formal role in planning issues in the West Hampstead area, the NDF is concerned that normal planning processes have been ignored or circumvented.

We welcome Camden planning enforcement officers’ original intention to require planning permission for the advertising element of the artwork, the “*Through Arts We Rise*” lettering, which would be subject to formal consultation. We have now heard that *Through Arts We Rise* intends to change its name to circumvent this requirement. We regard this as being very much contrary to the spirit of what you are trying to achieve in building a consensus.

We would like to know if Camden planning officers have taken legal advice as to whether a retrospective change of name is legal, or if the artwork is still subject to planning permission if it uses the name an organisation trades under as opposed to its official name.

Conclusion

While we applaud your efforts as local councillors to find a solution to this divisive issue that is acceptable to as many members of the local community as possible, we believe there are still important issues to be addressed, and in particular the process for establishing the membership of the new community group, the type of art to be displayed in the short term, and the legality of circumventing planning law by a change of name.

Keith Moffitt and Nick Jackson

Co-Chairs

**On behalf of Fortune Green and West Hampstead Neighbourhood
Development Forum**

Statement by Councillor Peter Taheri & Councillor Shiva Tiwari

West Hampstead residents will be aware of the controversy over the 'Through Arts We Rise' murals recently painted on the West Hampstead Thameslink road bridge. As local councillors, we appreciate the many e-mails we have received from local residents, both supportive of and concerned about the murals, and we are aware of the petitions circulated about this.

Apart from the need to comply with the law and planning rules, and apart from the policy goal of doing whatever is most effective to get support to those in need with the ambition that no-one should have to sleep rough, we have been focused on the importance as councillors of listening to and serving the local community, and creating a space for conversation and the reaching of a consensus when – as here – local views are divided.

We appreciate that, through the subjective medium of art, this project sought to create something beautiful with a powerful message inspiring positivity, compassion and solidarity.

We also appreciate that the local community should have a say in how their public spaces should look, which of many worthy causes are promoted, and also by whom.

Given the practical difficulties of setting up meaningful community consultation now while supporting social distancing, we are pleased that a compromise solution has been agreed, with the agreement of Through Arts We Rise and Network Rail, subject to a resolution being found concerning the legalities of advertising rules.

The bridge will become a venue for works of art, installed on a rotating and periodic basis, with the local community – with the engagement and involvement of Through Arts We Rise and other local artists such as those involved in local community centres – to decide in advance what will be the next installation. Post-lockdown, a new, apolitical, local community group will be convened to meet, consider and decide on the next artwork.

Those who supported the present mural can be reassured that, subject to an expected resolution of the planning legalities, the mural will remain in place for a fixed period while the local community group gets up and running. The message of hope and solidarity with the most vulnerable is heard and awareness is raised. The space will remain a space where the mundane can become the sublime and where, if the community wish, West Hampstead can express its solidarity with worthy causes.

West Hampstead may well want to use this space to express itself on a host of different issues. To name just four: our opposition to domestic violence and violence against women, on our conviction that black and ethnic minority people have a right to equal and fair treatment, on the crisis of mental illness in our communities, or on our position as an open and diverse area that stands in solidarity with refugees and the most vulnerable in society. Or, in turn, on all of these issues and more, or to display artwork by local school children, or just to have a beautiful landscape with some trees painted on: West Hampstead will decide.

Those who opposed the present mural can be reassured that it is not a permanent fixture and that they can help decide what takes its place in due course. Their voices will be heard too and their preferences too must be reflected in a democratic process. While there is much to say about how the present mural was installed and by whom, we can in future ensure that our whole community is heard.

Having periodic installations will help ensure that the artwork remains fresh and in good condition. And now that the bridge has been painted on, the reality is that the

alternatives were either (a) one or two black walls that would encourage graffiti tags or (b) artwork.

We hope and expect that West Hampstead will embrace this exciting opportunity to take what was a plain wall and make it into a space of creativity, innovation, variety, and beauty. Something we can all do together. While art is subjective and not everyone will love each installation, or even the present one, we hope that this compromise will help bring our community together in these troubled times.

Councillor Peter Taheri & Councillor Shiva Tiwari