Firstly can I thank you for your generosity in accommodating me at short notice. I have been recovering from surgery, and so been playing catch-up.

I know my colleague Graham Buckle, Vicar of St Stephen’s Rochester Row has already spoken, and I just wanted to give a very short presentation from my perspective as a local parish priest.

St Matthew’s church is in Great Peter Street, a few hundred yards from the Victoria Tower Gardens, and in normal times the church is open every day, and widely used as a place for private prayer, reflection and rest.

The geographical parish runs from Horseferry Road across to Petty France and down to the river, and like most parishes has a distinct character. It is home to a number of government departments, think tanks, embassies, offices and shops. But it is also home to a wide and varied community who live here, and call it home. And it is to this community aspect I would like to speak.

People imagine that this is a very privileged area, and in truth it is. But it contains significant pockets of real deprivation. Social housing sits adjacent to some of the most expensive properties in London, and it is this distinct blend that helps makes our part of Westminster so special.

It is an area characterized by the powerful and the powerless, the strong and the fragile, those who are wealthy and those who are poor.

In Great Peter Street we have two hostels for men who are very vulnerable, and there is a considerable and growing incidence of homelessness in the area.

Our parish has an excellent primary school with currently 183 children, in which again the diversity of the local community is reflected. We have approximately 25 languages spoken, and about a quarter of our children are on free school meals.

We have 25 children from service families, who live in dense, local housing which is less than ideal for the needs of children growing up.

Very few residences have any garden or yard, the two playgrounds for our school are small, and barely adequate.

The school hugely values the Victoria Tower Gardens, which it uses creatively for organised and informal activities.

I would also stress that as an area we are very much subject to, dare I say it, ‘lockdown’ meaning that events culminating in protests around Parliament can make life for families who live here very difficult, particularly at weekends when protests so often happen for the benefit of an empty parliament and an empty Whitehall.

I’ve heard it said that some of the local criticism of the Holocaust Memorial is no more than Nimbyism. I can assure you, as someone who engages on a daily basis with those who live and work here, that this is simply not the case.

The anxiety felt locally about the implications of this proposed development for our community is deep rooted, reflecting concern about the erosion of public land in which people can gather. In a highly utilitarian landscape, public, democratic space is incredibly important.

We’re talking about a small but vibrant park, in which those who come to play with their children or bring their dogs can feel as much at home as those with mental health issues. During lockdown this year, the Victoria Tower Gardens was for some, I would suggest, a vital life-line in a time of deep darkness. I came to appreciate, myself, very strongly, the wisdom of our forebears who won the battles to create public open spaces even in the very heart of our capital city.

The desire to locate expressions of national concern in central London is entirely understandable. It is a clear way of shaping the priorities we set for ourselves as a nation, and national interests must of course be respected and accommodated. At the same time there must be a guarding against the kind of attitude that says that the locus of any national focus outside the centre of London, indeed outside London itself, somehow lessens the importance we place upon the matter.

The cause of the Holocaust Memorial, and the need for connected education about the fate of all the victims of Nazi terror, very much including Jewish victims, but also those of other social groups, I support deeply as a Christian priest. That for me is not the issue. And others have spoken persuasively about this.

My concern is about the impact (surely unintended, but likely to be hugely significant nonetheless) on the ecology of a diverse but quite vulnerable locality. To build the Memorial on Victoria Tower Gardens and thereby sadly to remove it from general public use is effectively to kettle a community. While some might argue that this is a price worth paying, I urge us to beware the dangers of such arguments, and to note that it is not the wealthy of Westminster, those who perhaps have second homes in the country, who will bear this cost, but the already under-privileged and marginalised.

Open space is vital for human flourishing, and Victoria Tower Gardens plays a significant role in this diverse and delicate environment. Not only is it a space in which much-needed recreation can occur, it is also one of the very few remaining spaces in this part of London in which people of different classes, cultures and creeds can meet. It is common ground and it is on such common grounds that understanding and bonds can be formed between people in an organic way.

Such organic bonds are vital to the functioning of a healthy democracy. I have seen this happening in Victoria Tower Gardens with my own eyes, as passing nods of recognition turn into short conversations and then, sometimes, into firm friendships. And a healthy democracy is, in itself, necessary so that the horrors of Nazi extremism, or its modern and potential equivalents, may never occur in this or any other nation.

We need a national Holocaust Memorial, absolutely. I strongly support its creation. But I humbly submit that this suggested location is wrong and I beg those who have power to think again.