# Controversy surrounds transparency and security of China’s London embassy plans



The planning application for China’s new embassy at Royal Mint Court in London has sparked considerable controversy, with critical issues surrounding transparency, security, and public safety remaining unresolved. Former housing secretary Angela Rayner took the unusual step of 'calling in' the application last year, ensuring the final decision would rest with her rather than Tower Hamlets Council, which had already raised serious concerns. This move underscored the high-profile nature and sensitive implications of the scheme.

One of the most contentious points involves China’s decision to ‘grey out’ or redact significant portions of the architectural plans, obscuring the intended use of some rooms within the embassy. This has provoked fears among Hong Kong dissidents and Chinese pro-democracy activists in the UK that these secretive areas could be used to detain and interrogate opponents of the Chinese Communist regime. In response to these anxieties, Rayner demanded that the Chinese authorities provide explanations for every redaction.

China, through planning consultants representing it, has only partially complied. They clarified the function of some spaces but refused to reveal details on others, arguing that embassy layouts differ from regular projects and citing as precedent the US embassy plans, which also did not disclose internal layouts. However, legal expert Lord Banner criticised this stance, pointing out that the Royal Mint Court site contains listed buildings, making it impossible to claim that withheld details have no planning or safety implications. He specifically noted concerns over potential structural and fire safety issues and urged the new housing secretary, Steve Reed, to insist on full, unredacted plans before granting approval. Banner also flagged the diplomatic immunity China would enjoy over the premises, offering it near-total freedom over what happens inside those rooms.

Alongside these transparency issues, public safety has been a persistent worry. Tower Hamlets Council had originally rejected the planning applications unanimously in December 2024, highlighting risks to residents and tourists, heritage conservation conflicts, as well as pressures on police resources and road safety caused by anticipated congestion. Although the Metropolitan Police later withdrew their formal objection after securing assurances about protest space that would not unduly disrupt roads, the council’s initial reservations still stand. The council emphasised in a February 2025 update that the Secretary of State would make the final ruling following a scheduled public inquiry.

Another striking element of the plans is China’s intention to keep a section of the site open to the public, allowing visitors to view the ruins of a Cistercian abbey and access a proposed Chinese heritage centre. UK security agencies remain uneasy, worrying that this open area—being on Chinese sovereign territory—could prevent emergency services and police from responding promptly during security incidents or health emergencies. While the Foreign and Home Offices requested that China enclose this public section within the embassy’s secure perimeter, Beijing declined but promised, as a planning condition, to permit emergency access if needed.

The scale of China’s embassy has also drawn attention. Described as Europe’s largest embassy, it covers multiple former Royal Mint buildings and includes extensive basement spaces, a tunnel connecting buildings, and accommodation for hundreds of staff. However, many details remain shrouded in secrecy, with critical rooms and facilities redacted supposedly for security reasons. This raises broader questions from national security experts, including international think tanks, who warn that the site is too small to safely accommodate large-scale protests and could be exploited for intelligence activities shielded by diplomatic immunity.

The outcome of the final decision by the current housing secretary, Steve Reed, hinges on reconciling these complex legal, security, and public safety factors with China’s insistence on confidentiality. The unresolved concerns around redacted plans, emergency access, and public safety measures suggest that the matter will remain under close scrutiny as the inquiry proceeds.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c864w2942vdo), [[2]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2024/December/Tower-Hamlets-refuses-Chinese-Embassy-planning-applications.aspx), [[3]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2025/February/Council-statement-on-the-planning-application-for-the-Chinese-Embassy-at-the-Royal-Mint-Court.aspx)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c864w2942vdo), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/1c85300d-af36-4c49-9a45-8ebcc1c6a006), [[6]](https://www.rfa.org/english/china/2025/02/17/china-uk-super-embassy-basement-tunnel/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c864w2942vdo), [[7]](https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-new-london-super-embassy-risk-national-security), [[2]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2024/December/Tower-Hamlets-refuses-Chinese-Embassy-planning-applications.aspx), [[3]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2025/February/Council-statement-on-the-planning-application-for-the-Chinese-Embassy-at-the-Royal-Mint-Court.aspx)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c864w2942vdo), [[7]](https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-new-london-super-embassy-risk-national-security), [[3]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2025/February/Council-statement-on-the-planning-application-for-the-Chinese-Embassy-at-the-Royal-Mint-Court.aspx)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c864w2942vdo), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/1c85300d-af36-4c49-9a45-8ebcc1c6a006), [[5]](https://www.itv.com/news/london/2025-08-07/angela-rayner-calls-on-china-to-explain-redacted-images-in-super-embassy-plans)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c864w2942vdo), [[6]](https://www.rfa.org/english/china/2025/02/17/china-uk-super-embassy-basement-tunnel/), [[7]](https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-new-london-super-embassy-risk-national-security)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c864w2942vdo), [[2]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2024/December/Tower-Hamlets-refuses-Chinese-Embassy-planning-applications.aspx), [[3]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2025/February/Council-statement-on-the-planning-application-for-the-Chinese-Embassy-at-the-Royal-Mint-Court.aspx), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/1c85300d-af36-4c49-9a45-8ebcc1c6a006)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c864w2942vdo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2024/December/Tower-Hamlets-refuses-Chinese-Embassy-planning-applications.aspx> - In December 2024, Tower Hamlets Council unanimously rejected the Chinese Embassy's planning applications for the redevelopment of Royal Mint Court. The council cited concerns over resident and tourist safety, heritage impact, police resources, and highway safety due to the area's congestion. The Secretary of State, Angela Rayner, had 'called in' the application, meaning she would make the final decision after a public inquiry. The council's decision was advisory, and the final approval rested with the Secretary of State.
3. <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2025/February/Council-statement-on-the-planning-application-for-the-Chinese-Embassy-at-the-Royal-Mint-Court.aspx> - In February 2025, Tower Hamlets Council provided an update on the Chinese Embassy's planning application for Royal Mint Court. The Secretary of State had 'called in' the application, and a public inquiry was scheduled for February 11-18, 2025. The council noted that the Metropolitan Police had removed its objection to the application, stating sufficient space for future protests without significantly impacting the adjacent road network. However, the council's initial concerns remained, and the final decision would be made by the Secretary of State.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/1c85300d-af36-4c49-9a45-8ebcc1c6a006> - In August 2025, China declined to provide detailed information about redacted areas in its architectural drawings for a planned embassy in London. The embassy, intended to be the largest in Europe and located opposite the Tower of London, raised national security concerns. The UK housing department noted that parts of the blueprints, especially for the Cultural Exchange Building and Embassy House, were obscured. UK Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner demanded unredacted plans or specific explanations of the withheld sections. In response, Chinese officials argued that the current level of detail adhered to planning norms and was sufficient.
5. <https://www.itv.com/news/london/2025-08-07/angela-rayner-calls-on-china-to-explain-redacted-images-in-super-embassy-plans> - In August 2025, Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner demanded that China explain why parts of its plans for a new super-embassy in London were redacted. The Chinese embassy had blacked out areas of its plans for the sprawling new embassy site in central London. Rayner gave Beijing two weeks to explain why areas of its plans for the embassy were blacked out. The letter suggested that a final planning decision on the embassy site, at Royal Mint Court, would be made by September 9.
6. <https://www.rfa.org/english/china/2025/02/17/china-uk-super-embassy-basement-tunnel/> - In February 2025, Radio Free Asia reported on China's plans for a new 'mega-embassy' in London, revealing details such as a tunnel connecting two of the former Royal Mint buildings, basement rooms, and accommodation for hundreds of staff. The plans showed a large basement with a security airlock, access to two suites of unlabeled rooms, and a new tunnel connecting two existing buildings. However, the plans were labeled as having been 'redacted for security reasons,' making any further public information on the facility unlikely.
7. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-new-london-super-embassy-risk-national-security> - The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) analysed China's proposed 'mega-embassy' in London, highlighting concerns over national security. Local authorities expressed concern that the proposed site was too small to safely accommodate the anticipated influx of large-scale protests. In 2022, the Tower Hamlets Council rejected China’s planning application, citing the risk that large protests could endanger local residents. Later in 2024, London Metropolitan Police’s counterterrorism unit echoed these concerns, warning that the site’s layout would funnel protesters and could disrupt surrounding roads.