# Labour government’s intervention revives controversial Chinese embassy plans at Royal Mint Court



In 2018, the Chinese government made a significant real estate purchase near the Tower of London, acquiring a historic site for £255 million that once housed a Cistercian abbey and was later used for minting British coins. The plan was to develop a sprawling diplomatic complex covering 20,000 square metres, intended to mark a “new chapter” in China-UK relations according to China’s then-ambassador, Liu Xiaoming. However, the scheme swiftly became mired in controversy, facing staunch opposition from local residents, human rights groups, and Members of Parliament concerned about various political and security risks.

The turning point came in December 2022 when Tower Hamlets Council unexpectedly refused planning permission, citing concerns about the embassy’s impact on local residents, heritage, safety, and infrastructure. Tower Hamlets, with its diverse population including many from communities concerned about China’s human rights record—such as Hongkongers and Uyghurs—became a focal point of opposition. The council’s elected members overruled their planning officers’ recommendation in favour of the project and highlighted issues related to potential large-scale protests and associated security risks. This rejection stunned observers and highlighted the deep local resistance to the embassy plans.

China, frustrated by the decision, sought to overturn it through various means. Over the next two years, Chinese embassy officials engaged in private meetings with influential local figures, exploring avenues such as revising their application or pursuing a judicial review. These discussions took place at locations in central London and included individuals with ties to both the local community and pro-China organisations. At the same time, the embassy held cultural events at the Royal Mint Court site to bolster community relations and maintain a presence. Despite attempts to secure government intervention, both Conservative ministers and London’s mayor, Sadiq Khan, declined to step in to facilitate the project after Tower Hamlets’ decision, leaving the matter unresolved and the embassy plans in limbo.

The situation shifted dramatically in mid-2024 following the Labour party’s landslide election victory. China resubmitted its planning application in July 2024, shortly after Labour took office, reigniting the controversy. In August 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping personally raised the issue with Prime Minister Keir Starmer during a phone call. Subsequently, Angela Rayner, then housing secretary, exercised her powers to ‘call in’ the application, removing the final decision from Tower Hamlets Council and initiating a formal planning inquiry. This direct government intervention was seen as a significant turning point, signalling central government willingness to reconsider the project despite local opposition.

The inquiry commenced in early 2025, and Tower Hamlets Council notably scaled back its opposition by February 2025, stating it was “no longer in a position to present evidence” against the embassy’s application. This development increased the likelihood of government approval, as the local authority’s initial concerns about protests, safety, and congestion appeared to soften. Meanwhile, the Chinese Embassy publicly expressed disappointment at the council’s original rejection but asserted that their resubmitted plans adhered closely to UK planning policies and professional recommendations. They also urged the UK government to honour its international obligations concerning diplomatic missions.

As the government prepares to make a final decision—expected by 21 October 2025—the issue remains deeply politically sensitive. Opponents, including local residents and human rights advocates, have signalled intentions to pursue judicial review, citing fears that the embassy could serve as a tool for the Chinese Communist Party to intimidate or detain political dissidents in the UK. Security concerns persist given the site’s proximity to the City of London, raising questions about the scale of potential protests and the capacity of local police resources.

This saga underscores a broader diplomatic dilemma for the UK government, balancing the strategic relationship with China against local and national concerns about security, human rights, and community impact. The involvement of senior political figures in discussions and the shift in official stance following the Labour government’s election indicate the high stakes involved. Whatever the outcome, the fate of the “super-embassy” at Royal Mint Court will have lasting implications for China-UK relations and local governance in London.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/04/china-mega-embassy-dilemma-starmer), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/04/china-mega-embassy-dilemma-starmer)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/04/china-mega-embassy-dilemma-starmer), [[3]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2024/December/Tower-Hamlets-refuses-Chinese-Embassy-planning-applications.aspx), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdd6yydmd03o)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/04/china-mega-embassy-dilemma-starmer)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/04/china-mega-embassy-dilemma-starmer), [[7]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china-resubmits-application-build-contested-big-embassy-london-2024-08-14/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/04/china-mega-embassy-dilemma-starmer), [[3]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2024/December/Tower-Hamlets-refuses-Chinese-Embassy-planning-applications.aspx), [[5]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/tower-hamlets-chinese-embassy-royal-mint-court-planning-inspectorate-hearing-b1210531.html), [[6]](https://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/PressandMedia/Spokepersons/202412/t20241210_11541933.htm)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/04/china-mega-embassy-dilemma-starmer), [[3]](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2024/December/Tower-Hamlets-refuses-Chinese-Embassy-planning-applications.aspx), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdd6yydmd03o)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/04/china-mega-embassy-dilemma-starmer> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/04/china-mega-embassy-dilemma-starmer> - In 2018, China purchased a prime site near the Tower of London for £255 million, aiming to build a new diplomatic complex spanning 20,000 square metres. The plan faced opposition from local residents, human rights campaigners, and MPs. In December 2022, Tower Hamlets Council refused planning permission, citing concerns over its impact on the area and residents. Despite this, China resubmitted the application in July 2024, and President Xi Jinping personally raised the matter with Prime Minister Keir Starmer in August 2024. The final decision now rests with Housing Secretary Angela Rayner, with a deadline set for October 21, 2025.
3. <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2024/December/Tower-Hamlets-refuses-Chinese-Embassy-planning-applications.aspx> - On December 9, 2024, Tower Hamlets Council's Strategic Development Committee unanimously rejected the Chinese Embassy's planning applications for the Royal Mint Court site. The decision was based on concerns over resident and tourist safety, heritage, police resources, and highway safety due to the area's congestion. The Secretary of State, Angela Rayner MP, had previously 'called in' the application, making her the ultimate decision-maker. A Local Inquiry was scheduled to commence in the last week of January 2025 to determine the planning and listed building applications.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdd6yydmd03o> - Tower Hamlets councillors voted unanimously to reject the Chinese Embassy's proposal for a new embassy opposite the Tower of London. The council cited potential security risks due to the size of protests the embassy could attract. Although the council's decision was advisory, the final say rested with the government, as the application had been 'called in' by the Secretary of State, Angela Rayner MP. A planning inquiry was set to take place in the new year to resolve the matter.
5. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/tower-hamlets-chinese-embassy-royal-mint-court-planning-inspectorate-hearing-b1210531.html> - In February 2025, during a national inquiry into the Chinese Embassy's proposal for the Royal Mint Court site, Tower Hamlets Council admitted it was 'no longer in a position to present evidence' against the application. This development increased the likelihood of the proposal being approved. The council's earlier objections had been based on concerns over potential protests and their impact on the surrounding area.
6. <https://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/PressandMedia/Spokepersons/202412/t20241210_11541933.htm> - On December 10, 2024, a spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in the UK expressed disappointment over Tower Hamlets Council's decision to refuse planning permission for the new embassy project. The spokesperson emphasized that the resubmitted application had fully considered the UK's planning policies and the views of all relevant parties, describing it as a high-quality development scheme. They also highlighted the professional support from the council's planning officers and urged the UK to fulfill its international obligations regarding diplomatic missions.
7. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-resubmits-application-build-contested-big-embassy-london-2024-08-14/> - In August 2024, China resubmitted its application to build a large embassy in London, a project previously rejected in December 2022 over security concerns and impacts on residents. The resubmission came shortly after the Labour government took power on July 5. The Tower Hamlets council, which initially rejected the application, is currently reviewing the new plans. The national government might intervene if the proposal is rejected again and China appeals.