OXFORD LOCAL PLAN 2045 EXAMINATION

MATTER 5, ISSUE 3, SITE SPE14 – RUSKIN FIELD

HEARING STATEMENT
On behalf of
THE FRIENDS OF OLD HEADINGTON

Reg.19 representations at 008 REP.3 100

A. INTRODUCTION

1. This Hearing Statement is submitted on behalf of the Friends of Old Headington ("**FOH**") in relation to Matter 5, Issue 3, Site SPE14 ("**the Site**"). FOH is a registered charity and resident association formed in 1959 to protect, preserve, and celebrate the distinct, rural village character of the Old Headington Conservation Area ("**OHCA**").

2. In summary, the Site has been consistently rejected for allocation for development over the past 90 years,[1] with one Inspector in 2012 identifying it as creating "*an important open setting to the tightly knit historic core of the Conservation Area that is fundamental to its intrinsic character*".[2] This history, which appears to have been largely ignored by the Council, demonstrates that the Site is fundamentally unsuitable for development. FOH therefore seeks its deletion from the Draft Plan.

3. The representations below should be read alongside FOH's Reg.19 representations ("**FOH Reg.19**").

B. RESPONSE TO MIQS

Q1 What is the site boundary based on and is it justified?

4. In its Reg.19 representations[3] [008 REP.3 120], the Site's promoter, Ruskin College ("**the College**"), requested a minor extension to the boundary of the Site to accommodate the

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[1] 008 REP.3 100, pp.4-6.
[2] Report on the Examination into the Barton Area Action Plan, 14 November 2012, annexed to this Statement.
[3] 008 REP.3 120, §4.1.21.

proposed access. The fact that this land has not been included in the Site speaks to the lack of consideration that the Council has given to this allocation in general.

5. From FOH's perspective, the Site comprises the northern part of Ruskin Field and the most sensitive part in terms of its relationship to the OHCA within which it sits. This was recognised by the Inspector who rejected the allocation of the Site in the Barton Area Action Plan ("**BAAP**") in 2012 (see above) and also by the Oxford Local Plan 2036 Inspector, who excluded the northern part of Ruskin Field, saying (emphasis added), *"because of the **sensitivity of the northern part**; development here could have an adverse impact on the Old Headington Conservation Area…"*.[4]

6. It is entirely unclear why the Site boundary has been drawn around the most sensitive part of Ruskin Field in heritage terms; such a boundary is plainly not justified.

Q2 How has the scale of residential development been established and is Policy SPE14 justified and effective, having particular regard to the context of the site and the need to make an efficient use of land?

7. As noted above, FOH's primary position is that the Site should not be allocated at all. However, without prejudice to this, it strongly resists the College's suggestion that it could accommodate 130-160 dwellings.[5]

8. This figure appears to have been derived from a reference in the Council's Reg.19 Background Paper on *"Efficient Use of Land"* to a density of 35 dph for conservation areas.[6] However, the Council described this figure as a *"general assumption"*[7] and acknowledged that *"conservation areas have not been identified as a specific typology [for density calculations] because they vary so much in character, from densely packed and urban to ancient rural settlements that retain a semi-rural character"*. This Site is plainly more akin to this latter category and so would justify a much lower density than the stated 35 dph, which is assumed to be an average across all conservation area types. Indeed, even applying a 35 dph figure gives a *maximum* of 123 dwellings on the College's own calculations, which is short of its own proposed 130-160 *minimum*.[8]

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[4] 008 REP.3 100, p.5.
[5] 008 REP.3 120, §2.1.19.
[6] BGP.003.
[7] Ibid., §3.8.
[8] 008 REP.3 120, §4.1.9.

9. Moreover, the College's proposed minimum completely ignores the constraints imposed by the draft policy itself, which include: retaining boundary and internal trees and hedgerows (criterion a); open space in the southern part (criteria d and i); significant green features (criterion g); retained views (criterion h); and low-rise development (criterion j).[9] The College proposes to delete or dilute criteria d, h, i and j precisely because they cannot be reconciled with its figure.[10] This is putting the cart before the horse; it is wholly unjustified.

Q3 Can a safe and suitable access to the site be achieved for all users, consistent with paragraph 115 of the Framework?

10. The Site has no vehicular access at present. Policy SPE14 identifies Foxwell Drive as *"likely to provide the only option"*.[11] However, the access land lies outside the proposed allocation. In addition, an investigation carried out by Dr Judith Webb BSc PhD BEM, a professional ecologist, has identified a small calcareous spring fen site which flows towards the north-western field of the Site, where the access is proposed. This is likely to contain accumulated peat deposits and is therefore wholly unsuitable for development.[12] If the *"only option"* for access to the Site cannot be developed, then its allocation is clearly neither justified, effective nor consistent with national policy.

11. For completeness, FOH would also refer the Examination to its broader concerns about the impact of the additional volume of vehicles passing through the streets of Old Headington.[13]

Q4 Is the allocation justified and consistent with national planning policy insofar as heritage matters are concerned? What information is available to demonstrate that the site can be developed in a way that preserves or enhances the character or appearance of the Old Headington Conservation Area and the setting of neighbouring listed buildings?

12. As noted above, and in more detail in the FOH Reg.19,[14] previous Inspectors have consistently found that the Site cannot be developed in a way that preserves or enhances

[9] CSD.001, p.232.
[10] 008 REP.3 120, §§4.1.27 and 4.1.44.
[11] CSD.001, p.232.
[12] 008 REP.3 103, p.2.
[13] 008 REP.3 100, pp.7-8
[14] Ibid, pp.5-6.

the character and appearance of the OHCA and the setting of neighbouring listed buildings.

13. The decisive evidence is the conclusion of the 2012 BAAP Inspector, reached after considering the written and oral evidence and viewing the Site from several short- and long-distance vantage points:[15]

> *"… the Ruskin Fields create an important open setting to the tightly knit historic core of the Conservation Area that is fundamental to its intrinsic character. Whilst development could feasibly be designed and laid out to preserve the appearance of the Conservation Area and to safeguard the ecological importance of the hedgerows and trees that form the Fields' boundaries, development, no matter how sensitively designed, would inevitably result in the reduction of and would be intrusive in views of this green wedge and would have an adverse impact on the distinctive character of the Conservation Area."*

14. The Inspector concluded that this harm would not be outweighed by the benefits of affordable housing, open space and improved pedestrian and cycle links. Allocation *"would be inappropriate and unjustified, and would therefore be unsound"*. That finding goes to the principle of development, not to its design. The Inspector expressly considered whether careful layout could avoid harm and found that it could not. Her finding is consistent with the 1990s Green Belt Inspector, who found that the land *"should properly be kept permanently open to preserve the setting of the northern edge of Old Headington"*. It is also consistent with the exclusion of the northern fields from the Oxford Local Plan 2036. In its response to the Inspector's MIQs for the 2036 Plan, the Council stated:

> *"Old Headington has a clear village/development envelope and distinct character. The fields presently form part of the rural setting of the village, allowing for a degree of visual separation with development to the north, helping to keep the historic character and settlement pattern of the village. Development of the two fields outside the allocation beyond the existing boundary to the north of the walled garden and leading down the A40 would be likely to have a substantially harmful impact on the character, appearance and setting of Old Headington Conservation Area and the listed buildings and would be contrary to Policy DH3 and the NPPF."*

15. The evidence for this Draft Plan does not adequately explain why these conclusions should now be reversed. The Reg.18 site assessment gives the effects on the OHCA and the listed wall the most negative score ("--"). Yet it concludes that there are *"no significant heritage concerns"*.[16] This is a bizarre and wholly unsubstantiated finding in light of the consistently strong views expressed by previous Inspectors and the Council (above). FOH

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[15] Report on the Examination into the Barton Area Action Plan, 14 November 2012, annexed to this Statement, §32.
[16] PCD.001e-040.

understands that the principal change relied upon by the Council is that the Council has now provisionally allowed access to the Site over its land. However, as will be apparent from the above, the lack of access was not previously given as a reason for rejecting the Site. The issues with it are far more fundamental.

16. For its part, the College asserts that matters have changed since the Site's *very recent* rejections. It says it has obtained a "*desk based heritage report*",[17] although to FOH's knowledge this has not been published in the course of this examination. In any event, it is scarcely credible that heritage evidence was not available to the previous Inspectors; it is therefore unclear why this report should make any real difference.

17. The College also cites recent development at the College itself and ongoing development at Barton Park and planned development Land North of Bayswater Brook as changes to the context of the OHCA.[18] However, the OHCA Appraisal[19] explains that "*small fields cut off by the ring road provide the rural setting of the village*". Thus, recent and planned development to the north of the ring road has limited bearing on the importance of the role played by the Site in preserving the significance of the OHCA. It is also relevant to note that the 2012 BAAP Inspector was examining the plan for the Barton strategic site itself. She reached her conclusion in full knowledge of development in that location.[20] Indeed, contrary to what is said by the College, the removal of the remaining open countryside north of the ring road increases, rather than reduces, the importance of the Site as the last open link between the village and its rural origins.

18. The College accepts that the proposal will introduce built development into a currently undeveloped site. It proposes that criterion h be reworded so that buildings "*would not substantially harm*" the OHCA.[21] That wording assumes harm and lowers the test. Under the Framework, great weight must be given to the conservation of designated heritage assets, and any harm requires clear and convincing justification. The benefit here is a modest number of dwellings. The BAAP Inspector found such benefits insufficient to

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[17] 008 REP.3 120, §2.1.14.
[18] 008 REP.3 120, §4.1.37.
[19] Quoted at 008 REP.3 100, pp.3-4.
[20] Report on the Examination into the Barton Area Action Plan, 14 November 2012, annexed to this Statement, §24
[21] 008 REP.3 120, §4.1.45.

outweigh comparable harm. The allocation is not justified or consistent with national policy, and no modification can remedy that.

Q5 What is the justification for criteria j) and h), which require development to be 'kept low' and retain important views, including specific reference to the view from Stoke Place across the site to Elsfield?

19. As above, FOH's primary case is that no criteria can make the allocation sound, because the BAAP Inspector found that development *"no matter how sensitively designed"* would cause unacceptable harm. Criteria h and j seek to mitigate harm that is unacceptable in principle. Without prejudice to that case, if the Inspectors were minded to retain the allocation, criteria h and j should be retained and strengthened, and the College's proposed deletions rejected.

20. Criteria h and j show at least that the Council (unlike the College) recognises the sensitivity of the Site. The view from Stoke Place across the Site to Elsfield is identified in the OHCA Appraisal.[22] The Council's site capacity assessment describes it as *"one of the most sensitive across and out of the CA"*.[23] Its importance derives from the OHCA, not from the Elsfield View Cone. The College's observation that the Site lies outside the view cone[24] is therefore irrelevant. Its own assessment of February 2026 confirms that the northern hills remain visible from Stoke Place.[25]

21. Criterion j reflects the open character of the fields and their role in linking the conservation area to its rural origins.[26] The College's proposal for buildings of three to four storeys would be wholly at odds with that role.

C. CONCLUSION

22. For these reasons, Policy SPE14 is not justified, not effective and not consistent with national policy. It should be deleted. The Site should remain undeveloped open land, forming part of the setting of the Old Headington Conservation Area and of the green

[22] Ibid, §4.1.37.
[23] 016 CAP CAP.020.
[24] 008 REP.3 120, §§4.1.30-4.1.31.
[25] Ibid, §4.1.38.
[26] CSD.001, p.232.

infrastructure network. Without prejudice to that case, if the Inspectors were minded to retain the allocation, then the existing criteria should be retained.

BEN FULLBROOK

LANDMARK CHAMBERS

10 November 2026