



The Friends of Old Headington wish to make the following comments concerning the **Addendum to the Sites & Housing Sustainability Appraisal (CD 8.15)**

We note the restrictions that the Council records as applying to the ‘Ruskin fields’ site, but would like to see more recognition and documentation of the following features as far as this is compatible with the Sustainability Appraisal.

Conservation

There are various constraints which, taken together, define the fields to the north of the campus as unsuitable for development:

The fields have been deliberately preserved as part of Oxford's rural heritage for decades, and stand out as an open undeveloped feature which plays a positive role in the conservation area, marking an important transition from the built up part of the village to the adjoining countryside.

The countryside beyond the crinkle-crankle wall (added in the 1700s) has always been green and open, first as wild, then as common land; finally, after enclosure in about 1804, as the fields we see today.

In 1933 the first recorded proposal to develop the meadows was refused by the City Council.

In the 1940s the next owner safeguarded the fields with covenants which are still in place.

In 1994 the City Council stated that “the fields had no development potential and should properly be kept permanently open to preserve the setting of the northern edge of Old Headington”.

In 1998 the fields were brought into the Conservation Area, and given a “Special Open Space” designation.

In 2009 their value as a key feature of the area was restated by Ruskin College:

“The site bears a close relationship with the village of Old Headington from which you can catch distant glimpses of the Rookery through the seasonally changing trees ... The adjacent fields to the north, expressed through a different language of planting in their rural setting, are one of the most important features”. (*Design and Access Statement 09/00636/FUL (March 2009)*).

In 2011 (July) the Conservation Area Appraisal for Old Headington was adopted by the Council. That document makes it clear that all the Ruskin Fields play a vital role in setting the village of Old Headington within its rural context as well as providing an open green space which gives the whole area its special character. They will become even more important in providing the green setting of the historic village with the development of the West Barton site.

In 2011 (December) the Planning Policy team decided to exclude the Ruskin fields from both the Draft Submission for the BAAP and from the Sites and Housing DPD on the grounds that they are not suitable for development. This decision was supported by a majority vote in Full Council.

In 2012 work to preserve the fields continues: the green spaces around the periphery of Old Headington are recognized by local communities and various organizations as well as the Council itself as fulfilling a vital role not only for the Conservation Area but for Marston, Northway, and the future West Barton.

If building in the Ruskin Fields were permitted, that would create a precedent by implicitly inviting development proposals from the owners of other land south of the ring road with the potential drastically to reduce the green setting of the Conservation Area and lose permanently a valued community asset.

Local usage

Local use has been disputed by the Principal of Ruskin College, but it is a fact that these fields have been part of local life, as such pieces of countryside always are to the community that lives nearby, regardless of whether the land is private property or not.

The Ruskin fields are no different; they have provided the residents of Headington and Northway with a local amenity provably since at least 1970. A local archery group used the College's orchard and fields on a regular basis (by permission) in the early 1990s; two fields were subsequently let for grazing, prior to the approval of a planning application by Ruskin for a 'Trim Trail' for the use of students and public in 2009. During all this time local access continued on a regular basis until the recent lock-down of the fields with Keep Out signs, padlocks, and barbed wire made it possible for the College to claim that the fields are unused.

[Note: testimonies of local use can be supplied if required]

Biodiversity

The Council's identification of significant wildlife species on the site (see CD 7.23) together with local residents' less formal estimation of the importance of the fields as a natural habitat (see next two paragraphs) should be made explicit in the Addendum.

Wildlife

The fields have lain undisturbed apart from local use noted above, and are full of natural interest. The range of habitats (hedgerow, mature trees, pasture, boggy areas), has led to a wide variety of species being present. Local residents have recently observed foxes and deer; jays, woodpeckers, and finches, as well as dragonflies (various species) and bats from vantage points nearby.

Plants

Similarly, plant species have flourished on the site; in the verges of Stoke Place, adjacent to the eastern field, 26 different species of native British plants (excluding trees and shrubby growth) were found over a short distance in May 2011; if that number is easily observable a few yards away, the fields can be assumed to contain a wide range of species across its various habitats.

Public Opinion

Analysis of the responses to the Preferred Options consultation for the BAAP showed that the percentage of respondents living in nearby Headington, Northway, and Old Headington and objecting to development of the fields to the north of the Ruskin campus was significantly higher in each case than the overall opposition of 63% and 58% to large scale and even small scale development respectively.

A petition opposing development of the fields presented in June 2011 gathered approximately 420 signatures over 18 days without using obvious catchment areas such as outside Waitrose, or at the Headington crossroads, being aimed more at gauging strength of feeling than at amassing large numbers. Just under 100 signatories added a comment: for Northway residents the main concern was predominantly with the traffic generated by the proposed development, whereas for residents of Headington, Barton, and elsewhere the main concern was predominantly with the loss of a green space within the Conservation Area.

Sample comments drawn from each category are

“Enough traffic from hospital already”; “Lethal for local children”; “Do not spoil Northway”; “This scheme has not been thought through fully”; “The fields are clearly part of the Conservation Area”; “Thin end of the wedge”; “Build on old plots in the city, not on fields”; “A great loss to a special area”.

Letters to the *Oxford Times* and *Mail* (of which there were around 30 (plus comments submitted online) from the public and 3 from Prof. Mullender). Again, opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to development of the fields.

[A selection of these letters was attached as Appendix 1 to our previous response (CD 8.17.6.2)]

The rural surroundings of the Headington campus are also a valuable asset for Ruskin College and its students and staff. A former student has commented:

“I was deeply saddened to learn of the proposal to develop houses on what is called Ruskin Fields. ... The area was a lovely sanctuary where one could enjoy this place of natural beauty. .. I always imagined that as it was owned by Ruskin it would be safe

from any form of development. I have a great deal to thank Ruskin for but I could never sanction such a proposal. ... It would of course adversely affect the surrounding area. To argue that houses are needed, so build them there, is quite absurd. This is just the sort of thing that all the conservation organizations are opposing .. whereby small beautiful areas could be exploited by developers” [etc.]

Flood risk

The pasture land in this part of the Conservation Area is a runoff for surface water from the slopes above (as well as there being springs rising in the fields themselves). This is confirmed both by the frequent references made by Ruskin and their agents to the fields being ‘soggy’ and by the recent need for the College to pump water out of the basement of student accommodation blocks. Building on the fields is extremely likely to cause problems in the immediate vicinity as well as lower down the slope. The cycle track alongside the A40 regularly floods after heavy rain, when the water runs off the fields towards the bypass.

The recent flooding earlier this month, produced a torrent of surface water down Stoke Place, causing significant damage to the tarmac, because storm drains higher up were completely inadequate to cope with the run-off caused by the rain.

Furthermore, two households in Stoke Place suffered an inundation of sewage (one internal, one external) owing to the sewerage network across Headington being unable to cope. This has added to already widespread and serious concerns about the implications of any further development tapping in to the local network, concerns shared by Thames Water who have stated that there is no more capacity in the sewerage network in this part of Oxford (see *Oxford Times* 23 August pp. 1 and 4).

This will represent a further constraint for the foreseeable future, and we therefore feel that it should be explicitly acknowledged in the Addendum.

Traffic and access

Any development within the Ruskin fields would increase traffic in an already seriously congested area, and access is problematic, as pointed out in previous submissions by the Friends of Old Headington and many other respondents.

Justification

Housing need: it is clear from paragraph B12 of the Proposed Submission document that the benefit to the City of the small number of dwellings which Ruskin’s proposed development would contribute to the housing stock would be entirely outweighed by the damage sustained

by local communities, and could not be said to be justified in any case in view of the number of grounds on which the development of the fields should be opposed.

Development: building on the Ruskin fields would conflict with the Council's remit to preserve and enhance the special character, appearance, and setting of Conservation Areas, as well as with national policies (PPS5), and would damage the amenities both of local residents, and of the wider communities of Headington, Northway, and Barton. It is therefore right that this site is omitted from the Sites and Housing Proposed Submission document.

We fully support the omission of Ruskin Fields from the Addendum to the S.A. for the Sites and Housing Plan (CD 8.15) and suggest that it should include a statement that the College grounds fall into two distinct sections: a campus where further development for academic purposes may be permitted, and a green space which is totally unsuitable for development owing to its significance as open land for this part of Oxford.

Sarah King (Chairman, Friends of Old Headington)

1 The Croft
Headington,
OXFORD OX3 9BT