



The countryside charity
Oxfordshire

Campaigning to protect our rural county

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9 August 2023

Dear Ms Bowerman

Application P23/S2384/O

“Outline planning application for the demolition and clearance of existing buildings and structures (at Waterstock Golf Club) to allow for the construction of up to 120,000sqm of Use Class E employment floorspace comprising Research and Development units, Light Industrial units, ancillary Offices, ancillary Amenity Buildings (up to 2,400sqm), Creche (up to 600sqm), Forest School (up to 150sqm), along with new site accesses, internal roads and footpaths, surface and multi storey car parking, open space, landscaping, biodiversity enhancements, drainage features including SUDs and other engineering operations, infrastructure and associated works. All matters of detail reserved.”

The agents letter makes it clear that also up for decision are the proposed building heights of up to 18.5 metres (60 feet); the layout of the proposed major roads within the site; and the proposed shielding planting scheme. Other evidence is illustrative of what might or might not be the pattern of development.

Objection

The South Oxfordshire District Committee of CPRE **strongly objects** to this speculative application for a major unjustified development in the Oxford Green Belt not only because of its inappropriateness (which the applicants acknowledge) but also because of the demonstrable and significant harms it would cause to the environment and ecology, public amenity and access to recreation, the landscape, the conservation area and the listed buildings within it, and the already frail road network.

The public place a high value on the Green Belt. CPRE sponsored independent opinion research showed that 75% of Oxfordshire residents across the whole County, whether they lived in or near the Green Belt or not, believe that the Green Belt should remain open and undeveloped, despite the acknowledged pressure for development.

SODC Local Plan Policy STRAT 6 echoes National Policy in stating of the Green Belt that “within its boundaries, development will be restricted to those limited types of development which are



deemed appropriate by the NPPF, unless very special circumstances can be demonstrated. Very special circumstances will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm resulting from the proposal, is clearly outweighed by other considerations”.

CPRE policy is that the very special circumstances needed to justify Green Belt development can exist only where (a) the development is demonstrably in the public interest and (b) can only be accommodated on Green Belt land.

In this case the harm to the public interest would be all too real and significant whilst the “very special circumstances” claimed by the applicants to outweigh Green Belt constraints and the other harms we evidence are founded solely on their own self-serving hypothesis that the need for what are now Class E uses was understated by a factor of four in the adopted 2035 Local Plan, and that only their own 40 hectare site at Waterstock can fill the need hypothesised. (We assess the claimed “very special circumstances” in detail later in this document).

The Site Today

The applicants contend that the Green Belt nature of the site has already been damaged by the loss of openness caused by development as a golf course and more widely by the adjacent M40 and the Motorway Service Area [MSA] development. There is scant evidence on the ground to support this claim.

Whilst the golf course development may have technically resulted in some loss of previous openness this is not apparent on the site – where the impression is of naturally contoured greens surrounded by extensive woodland - and even less in more distant views.

The lie of the land slopes gently from the A418 which forms the southern boundary to the River Thames at the North (where the designated Waterstock Wildlife Site is based and where the river itself is expected to be announced this month to be a Conservation Target Area). From the Oxfordshire Way to the North, from the Waterstock Conservation Area, including the listed Waterstock House and Mill, there is a panorama of a very rural character, with considerably heavier tree planting even than in previous agricultural use. The driving range shelter is a simple one storey building, timber clad, and reminiscent of the agricultural barns which once stood on the site.

What is more, the site is tranquil with no traffic except golfers with their silent electric caddies, and only the occasional mower disturbing the silence. Taken with the recreational benefit of the tree-lined public access golf course and the rural views from the public footpaths the site is effectively indistinguishable from open countryside.

Although adjacent to the M40, the motorway was designed as a “corridor of movement not development” and is therefore “neutral”, as is the MSA that serves it. In any case the MSA is fully screened by pre-existing earthworks – it stands on the site of a now defunct railway – and the M40



itself is barely visible from the site as it is well-screened with trees to the North and then runs in a cutting past and beyond the application site.

Local people say this is not just Green Belt it is “M&S Green Belt” and there is justification for this not just because of its unspoilt tranquil rural nature, and the public access to it provided by the public golf course and the footpaths through it, but also because functionally it is a keystone protecting all of the Green Belt to the East of the motorway.

Harmful Impact of proposed Development

In stark contrast to its present rural nature the applicants propose to effectively cover this presently rural site with high rise “urban” tower buildings up to 18.5 metres (60 feet) high. These would visually overwhelm the rural nature of the site and dominate views into it, changing an intensely rural character to an urbanised sprawl, not only during the day but at night when the buildings would be lit.

Despite the proposals in the application, the sheer height of the buildings would prevent any effective screening. No existing trees on the site are of sufficient height and spread and even after thirty years growth new planting would be only beginning to reach the tops of the buildings, and even then with only the uppermost branches of their canopies.

Additionally, the buildings would house 2700 workers who would travel daily to and from work over the access roads to be created within the site, all highly visible within the panorama. It would change the site from its present quiet tranquil traffic free nature to noise, hustle and bustle, and the coming and going of vehicles, not just for workers, but HGVs to service the manufacturing, service vehicles and the bus routes diverted from the A418, creating emissions and pollution where none existed.

The rural character would be entirely destroyed, the public benefit of the footpaths would be substantially impaired (see the submission for CPRE’s Rights of Way consultant) and the recreational use of the site for golf would be lost.

The urban nature of the development and the new intensive traffic flows within the site would threaten the tranquillity of the River Thames, which is already the base for a designated Waterstock Wildlife Site and this week it is understood will be designated as part of the River Thames Conservation Target Area, stretching up to and beyond the tree-lined lake further up the slope.

The wildlife itself would be threatened by the noise and run-off, and the traffic emissions from the development site, not only through the four years of building and site clearance proposed, but when the site with all its new traffic flows is in use.

We can find no merit in the proposed very special circumstances claimed by the applications to outweigh the existential harm to the Green Belt or the urbanisation of this rural environment proposed.



National and Local Policy Background.

Local Policy STRAT 6, referenced earlier, states of the Green Belt that “within its boundaries, development will be restricted to those limited types of development which are deemed appropriate by the NPPF, unless very special circumstances can be demonstrated. Very special circumstances will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm resulting from the proposal, is clearly (our underlining) outweighed by other considerations.

This echoes National Policy in the NPPF which states at paragraphs 147 and 148, that *Inappropriate development* (which the applicants acknowledge this to be) *is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. ‘Very special circumstances’ will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm resulting from the proposal, is clearly (our underlining) outweighed by other considerations.*

At paragraph 11 of the NPPF, quoted by the applicants, setting out how planning applications should be determined it states:

“For decision-taking this means:

- c) approving development proposals that accord with an up-to-date development plan without delay; or*
- d) where there are no relevant development plan policies, or the policies which are most important for determining the application are out-of-date, granting permission unless:
 - i. the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a clear reason for refusing the development proposed; or*
 - ii. any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole.”**

The proposed development does not accord with the existing development plan either in its hypothesis of development land needed, or in the spatial distribution of economic development. Local Plan STRAT 1 focusses development (a) in the defined area of the Science Vale in the West of the District (which the applicants’ Economic Needs and Benefits Report contends should be extended to the Eastern side to include their client’s land at Waterstock) and (b) at sustainable settlements (i.e., Towns and Larger Villages) - whereas the focus of this application is the “unlisted” Green Belt and conservation area village of Waterstock, officially considered unsuitable for development.

The application of policies in the Framework provides clear reasons why the application should be refused and the adverse impacts of permitting this unnecessary and unjustified development would demonstrably outweigh the claimed very special circumstances.



Applicants Claimed Very Special Circumstances.

The applicants' contention that there are very special circumstances why this damage to the Green Belt should be approved depends essentially on their own unsupported hypothesis of an urgent need for more Class E development which is dramatically in excess of both the Local Plan and the Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment [OGNA].

In the Local Plan, Lichfields 2017 Employment Land Review at Table 2.11 shows the B1/B2 office and manufacturing requirement to 2035 at 13.6 hectares for the whole of South Oxfordshire. This application site alone would be three times that. The later unadopted OGNA, even in its highest "transformational" scenario to 2050, sees a need for just 28 hectares of office and Research & Development [R&D] land in the whole of the east side of the County. Green Belt land cannot be lost on the basis of such a hypothesis.

Their proposed reasons are listed below, in each case with CPRE's comments.

a. A market led approach to delivering the clear and pressing need for employment space to meet the requirements of the science and technology sector in and around Oxford which is not currently being met.

Comment. The "market led approach" is the assumption in the applicants' Economic Needs and Benefits Report (referred to as the Nicols report) that demand for Class E space is four times as great as the current Local Plan figure.

In the same report at 9.6 it states that the 2023 vacancy rate for existing premises in Oxfordshire is 4%. The Statista research which covers the whole of Europe finds that whilst this is a low vacancy rate it is not as low as the top five European cities, and in any case that *High vacancy rates can indicate an economic downturn, a lack of demand or possibly that standards do not meet speculative renters' needs. Low vacancy rates are in general considered a good thing as it means there is a good level of demand from customers, although low vacancy rates may also show a need for more development which is not being met.*

To put it at its very highest, therefore low vacancy rates are more likely to be a good thing than a bad thing and vacancy rates of 4% would not be indicating a massive shortfall in availability, certainly not the 75% shortfall the applicants contend as justifying their 40 hectare proposal. In any case this is not a specific argument for Green Belt development (a very special circumstance). It is, to the contrary, a purely speculative argument which would cause damage to the Green Belt with no certainty of any benefit, certainly not to the extent of clearly (as para 147 requires) outweighing the harm that would certainly be caused.

b. A significant contribution to the local and national economic investment and output.

Comment: Only if their hypothesis that the market is massively undersupplied is right, which is tenuous at best, see above. Otherwise, the market will be oversaturated, and occupancy rates will fall dramatically, resulting either in high vacancies in existing developments notably in the



Science Vale or there being no demand for the Waterstock site and therefore no employment benefits to offset the harm to the Green Belt site the permission would cause.

c. About 400 temporary direct and indirect jobs during the construction phase.

Comment: Irrelevant to the Green Belt as these benefits would be created wherever development occurred. In any event they should not be given weight, as the nuisance of construction is not.

d. Between 2,300 and 2,700 FTE jobs on site was fully operational, equivalent to a increase of between 1,081 and 1,269 net FTE jobs in the South Oxfordshire economy.

Comment: the jobs are as hypothetical as the applicants very high assessment of a need far in excess of the Local Plan and also irrelevant to the Green Belt as they would in any case be created wherever the development occurred.

e. The lack of alternative sites not in the Green Belt to accommodate the Development Proposal.

Comment. This depends both on the applicants' extreme assessment of need and on the assumption that only a single large site such as theirs is sufficient to meet it. However, their Nicol Economic Report acknowledges at 8.4 and 8.5 that a number of sites are available and that Milton Park and Harwell both offer similar facilities – and are already there – but dismisses these as being further from Oxford (Harwell is in fact just half a mile further from the City than Waterstock). What is more, being already operational they will already be providing the interactivity within themselves and between each other that is desirable in R&D whereas the Waterstock site would be remote.

f. Significant new on-site green infrastructure and an overall net biodiversity gain.

Comment: their own application documents state that there would be no on-site bio-diversity gain – indeed there would be a loss - and that biodiversity would be “bought” from outside suppliers. So, the development itself would be negative in biodiversity.

g. Highway safety enhancements at Junction 8a of the M40.

Comment: It is agreed that highway safety is poor on the stretch of the A418 with two serious accidents as recently as June. However, the development of itself would exacerbate these problems and it is in any case the responsibility of the County Council to maintain safe highways (further highways comment in other issues below).

h. Exemplary design attractive to the market and be in accord with the Build Beautiful principle of national policy.

Comment: The Building Better requirement applies everywhere and should ensure that all development is built beautiful, so this could not be a very special reason to justify Green Belt development. Building Better does not in any case justify unnecessary development but ensures that necessary development is more attractive.



i. A response to the absence of a current or imminent plan led solution to delivering the identified needs.

Comment: there is no external evidence to support their hypothesis that the need for Class E development is four times as high as provided in the current Local Plan nor that the upcoming plan will reflect that hypothesis. Consequently, the proper response is to await the upcoming local plan assessments of need and location.

The proposed very special circumstances taken individually or as a whole, are far too tenuous and tendentious to begin to provide evidence “clearly outweighing” harm to the Green Belt and other harms as local and national policy requires.

Given that there is an emerging 2040/2041 Plan it is in any case premature to pre-empt its conclusions on the quantity and spatial location of employment land, especially where such a strategic site as this whose development puts the whole Green Belt to the east of the M40 at risk is concerned.

Other Issues

a. Traffic and implications

The plans for approval show a network of roads through the site, with an enhanced M40 roundabout at the western end and a new roundabout at the eastern end accommodating a new exit from the site, Waterstock Lane itself, the present A418 and the A40 to High Wycombe.

The application states that the intention would be to divert the present bus routes from the adjacent A 418 through the site to accommodate the requirements of employees and visitors.

The A418 and the two motorway roundabouts are already busy and a high percentage of the journeys to work by employees and visitors will be made by car, putting extra load on an already stressed local highway network, and an A418 that has seen two major crashes on this section – which is signed as hazardous outside the golf club entrance - during the past three months.

We are concerned that the proposed enlargement of the eastern M40 roundabout is not adequate at least without similar work to the western side and that the new “Waterstock Lane” roundabout taking traffic from the A418/development site/village and A40 will become a significant blockage making the road past Chilworth House School - where frequent accidents occur – even more hazardous.

On the application site itself, the effect of the new roads and diverting the bus routes will bring emissions and exhaust fumes on to the site and the public footpaths which cross it where none presently occur, and nearer to the important environmental sites along the river, as well as increasing the overall levels of emissions in the area.

The impact on public footpaths is dealt with fully in our separate submission already separately provided.



b. Loss of public access to recreation.

The five holes of the eighteen hole course which are on the application site are not shown on the plans, and the application documents specifically state that present buildings (which would include the necessary clubhouse and professional shop) will be removed. It is stated that the golf facility accommodated on leased land on the east side of Waterstock Lane will continue and be enhanced. It is not clear what this means.

CPRE places high value, as does Government advice, on public access to Green Belt land. The extensive public footpaths – including the Oxfordshire Way – on the site as well as the golf course are an outstanding example of this in action.

The recreational use of the golf course on the application site would appear to be entirely lost and although the applicants assert that their land on the eastern site, which presently accommodates thirteen of the eighteen holes will retain an “enhanced” golf facility it does not seem possible that this could compensate for the loss of recreation land including the five holes, the clubhouse, the professional shop and parking from the development site.

c. Unlawful Waste Deposits.

For several years from 1997 there was extensive unlawful deposit of an estimated 300,000 tons of waste onto the southern half of the application site, notably beside the river and around the lake, which had itself been partly formed by unlawful clay extraction. Subsequently the waste was reworked into a pastiche of the original landscape but two metres above the original contours.

Following a series of court cases ending at the Court of Appeal the site owners were punished for non-compliance with court orders for the removal of the waste and restoration of original contours. The waste however remains in place.

This needs to be considered in relation to plans to redevelop the site.

Summary

We propose that there are no very special reasons remotely capable of clearly outweighing the harm to the Green Belt and other harms which the development would cause to landscape, public amenity, and the environmental assets of this site. The application should therefore be refused.

Yours sincerely

Dr G. P. Botting
Chair, CPRE South Oxfordshire