

To: West Area Planning Committee 10th December 2014
East Area Planning Committee 7th January 2015

Report of: Head of City Development

Title of Report: Oxford View Cones Study

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present the completed study of the 10 protected view cones and seek the Committees' comments and endorsement of the findings of the study

Key decision: No

Policy Framework: National Planning Policy Framework
Adopted Oxford Local Plan 2001-2016
Core Strategy 2006-2026

Legislative Framework:

Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended)
Town and Country Planning Act 1990

Recommendation(s): That the Committee

- a) supports the conclusions of the study and agrees with the assessments of each of the views
- b) agrees the actions and suggested changes in the consultation report, which reflect consultation responses
- c) endorse the view cones assessment, which will be used as background evidence and will be a material consideration in the determination of relevant applications.

Introduction

1. The 'dreaming spires' of Oxford are an internationally recognised symbol of the city and its renowned University. The image of the ancient city in its green setting draws visitors from around the world. The opportunity to walk into and through Oxford's countryside setting and look back on the city's domes, towers and spires from the green valley or hillsides is valued by its residents as a rich inheritance that should be carefully protected for future generations.
2. The historic environment of Oxford is an integral part of a thriving C21st city, facing particular challenges in accommodating new development that sustains its academic, research and commercial profile and meets the needs of its growing population. In 1962 the City Architect and Planning Officer observed that siting high buildings in Oxford presents particular problems because of the city's unique skyline. These observations led to the establishment of high buildings and view cone policies, which have been retained, with some adaptation, in successive development plans.

3. This study has been prepared to understand the significance of each of the views and the contribution to Oxford's heritage (**Appendix 1**). It is part of a suite of studies that the City Council's Heritage Team has produced (in collaboration with Oxford Preservation Trust) to inform development management decisions in the city (such as Character Assessment Toolkit, Oxford Heritage Asset Register, Oxford Archaeological Plan).

Approach to project

4. Understanding the significance of the views of Oxford is complex and goes beyond simply recording what is in the view. Developing the methodology has been a critical element of the project, to ensure it delivers the right outcomes but also so that it is compliant with current heritage management policy and government advice.
5. English Heritage has already commissioned work on views (based on City of London) and the setting of heritage assets (*Seeing History in the View, Setting of Heritage Assets*) and these publications have helped to inform the approach here. Simply put we wanted to establish what matters and why. To do that the study considers the characteristics and history of the viewing place, the viewers and the view. This is presented as a narrative with graphics to help illustrate the findings. Part One of the study explains the methodology and the special interest of the assets that are in the view and then in Part Two each of the ten view cones is examined, with a summary of their main characteristics.
6. The project has been a collaborative and pioneering exercise, sharing knowledge skills and resources with Oxford Preservation Trust. English Heritage funded the project, selecting the City's heritage team to develop a methodology that would work outside London acknowledging that the work would be 'experimental'. The knowledge and skills gained in carrying out developing the methodology is being shared with other authorities as part of English Heritage's objective to 'build capacity' across the heritage and development management sector and was a key component of the funding offer.

Development Management

7. The existing high buildings and view cones policy has been in place since the 1960's and broadly has served the city well. Recent developments have highlighted a need to better understand the views so that applicants and the local planning authorities are better able to assess the impact of proposals and landscape management regimes on the significance of the views. The study is not 'policy' - it represents an evidence base to inform decision making, in much the same way that the conservation area appraisals do. As such it will be a material consideration in decision making. The robustness of its methodology and the quality of the evidence are important as the study forms part of the evidence base that will be used to inform decision-making.

Public Consultation

8. There have been four key stages of consultation in the preparation of the study:
 - Initial feedback at a public meeting after the pilot study to test the scope and methodology (2010). Following this the methodology was adapted to be less technical and more accessible

- In the final draft report stages seeking feedback from ‘critical friends’ (February 2014), to test the methodology. Consultees were broadly supportive of the approach
- Consideration by the Oxford Design Review Panel (April 2014). Advice letter attached as **Appendix 2**. In summary, the Panel recognised the value of the view cones approach in planning the Oxford skyline of the future, and encouraged the Council to manage the inevitable changes in a positive manner.
- Wider and formal public consultation on the final draft (June 2014) which ran from 13th June to 25th July 2014. There were 43 responses with 85% agreeing that the study successfully defines the characteristics of the 10 views and what makes them special. The results of the wider stakeholder consultation are presented in **Appendix 3**.

Next Steps

9. The study is already being used to inform the design stages of a number of proposals in the city, and it will be a material consideration in plan making and development management. A published version will be made available on line and in printed form, also for use as an educational and research tool to encourage better understanding and enjoyment of this aspect of Oxford’s heritage.

Recommendations

That the Committee

- a) supports the conclusions of the study and agrees with the assessments of each of the views
- b) agrees the actions in the consultation report, to reflect consultation responses
- c) endorse the view cones assessment as evidence
- d) endorse the view cones assessment as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

Appendices:

Appendix 1. Oxford View Cones Study

Appendix 2. Advice letter from Oxford Design Review Panel, 28 April 2014

Appendix 3. Report of public consultation, 13 June to 25 July 2014.

Background Papers: *Understanding the setting of heritage assets* (English Heritage 2011) *PPS5 Practice Guide* (English Heritage 2010)

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