

28 April 2014

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Oxford City Council: Oxford View Cones Study – 10th April 2014

Dear Nicholas Worledge,

Thank you for presenting the Oxford View Cones Study to the Oxford Design Review Panel on 10 April 2014. We were impressed by the fact of your collaboration with the Oxford Preservation Trust, by the quality of the work undertaken to date, and by the imaginative approach to safeguarding views that Oxford City Council have adopted. It is important that Oxford City Council plan positively for the inevitable changes that the city will undergo, and an understanding of how the skyline works is crucial to this. The use of a blanket restriction on building over 18.2 metres has produced mixed results, and a more positive approach is required to secure the undulating additions the city's skyline requires.

The view cones approach:

- The View Cones Study is a readable document that achieves a good balance between technical fact and more experiential descriptions of the views – your key task is to plan the Oxford skyline of the future and this document is a good start to this endeavor
- We commend your descriptions of the history of key views and feel that your consideration of the relationship between the foreground and background of views is successful – you have learnt the lessons of ignoring the foreground
- It is important to consider your approach to the skyline beyond the 10 identified view cones – you should think about which other locations are significant and demonstrate the totality of Oxford – there could be a benefit in asking local communities which views they think are significant. As one example, there are views from, say Hinksey Heights, that could supplement and improve on the much compromised Raleigh Park view.
- It is possible that an existing national policy would carry more weight than a local views policy – you could therefore consider producing an Oxford specific version of paragraph 55 of PPS4

Planning positively:

- Be clear about the role of the document in managing change by saying what you consider a 'positive' impact on the skyline to be – the negative policy of limiting height is actually creating problems and it would be better to plan for Oxford's inevitable change and ensure it has a positive impact on the city's skyline
- We encourage you to take the lead in the management of Oxford's skyline, developing a townscape language and encouraging architects and their clients to strive for excellence – this may require you to take risks but by being satisfied with 'minimal impact' you risk producing a mediocrity that does not do Oxford justice
- One approach to managing change would be to create significant clusters of taller buildings in certain locations in places to create a new skyline, as demonstrated in Paris with the historic core balanced by La Defense – however we do appreciate that this could be a contentious approach complicated by the commitment of the city council and the university to the city centre.

- Though the foreground of some of the identified views may not be developed for 40 years there is a benefit in thinking about what happens when it does – this thinking should be built into the city's corporate objectives

Building design:

- It is important to focus on the location and significance of a building when considering its place within a view cone – in assuming a positive approach to managing change you should be able to judge when 'rules can be broken' for the best impact on the skyline – there is a good tradition of contemporary architecture in Oxford and you should be confident about building on this
- Whilst working with a working digital model of the city is essential to managing change, we urge caution when using ZVI maps as they fail to account for the greenery that is so characteristic of Oxford
- Interesting places are typified by the glances and vignettes created by the juxtaposition of buildings – you should consider whether these could be created when assessing schemes
- It is important to place significance on those schemes, existing and proposed, beyond the view cones to ensure quality across the city

Thank you for consulting us and please keep us informed of the progress of the scheme. If there is any point that requires clarification, please telephone us.

Yours sincerely



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cc (by email only)

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Review process

The Oxford View Cones Study was discussed on 10 April 2014 by Joanna van Heyningen (Chair), Clare Wright, Jessica Bryne-Daniel, Jo Evans, Colin Haylock and Gillian Horn. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.