

**FULL COUNCIL MEETING, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2011 – Address in respect of Agenda Item 21. Sites and Housing Development Plan Document (DPD) Proposed Submission Draft and Item 22. Barton AAP Proposed Submission Draft.**

I want to talk to you about the proposed Ruskin Fields housing development which has been left out of both the housing documents you are looking at tonight: the Barton Area Action Plan and the Sites and Housing Development Plan Document (DPD).

Each of you has the power to make this a conscience vote tonight by choosing between two neglected, soggy fields versus homes for 150 households, at least 75 of which would be affordable.

What will you say to those 75 individuals or families when they come asking you why they have nowhere to live and why a site that could provide affordable homes is not doing so?

- You may say: '**We were told that access would be a problem**'. We have put forward two access arrangements. The A40 left in, left out arrangement is, in fact, the same method of access on to a busy dual carriageway as that proposed for a site that is included within the allocation document, hence that argument does not hold water.
- You may say: '**We were worried about the density of housing**'. In fact, the proposed Headington Meads development on Ruskin Fields runs at 40 - 45 dwellings per hectare and the specific Core Strategy Policy CP6 seeks developments that have a density of a minimum 40 dwellings per hectare, to ensure efficient use of the land. Therefore, our development complies with this and that argument also falls.
- You may say: '**Ruskin Fields are in a Conservation Area**'. The aim of Conservation Area status is not to thwart development but to ensure that development is appropriate for the location. Our Heritage Statement has demonstrated the neutral impact of our development in conservation terms. We would say Ruskin Fields is no more sensitive than many sites included within the sites and housing document. Other sites have been allocated that have far graver site constraints. Hence that argument bears no weight.
- You may say: '**We were scared it would interfere with our other plans**'. In actual fact, it has always made more sense to think about the Barton AAP and Ruskin Fields together

because all the infrastructure – roads, sewers, a district heating scheme and so on – applies to the whole area thereabouts, not just to one small part of it.

All of these issues, though important, pale into insignificance when people are homeless and inadequately housed. The development of Ruskin Fields will not cause any significant harm to the local area; indeed a development of the highest quality that respects the natural environment and the character of Old Headington Conservation Area will be an asset to the area.

Ruskin Fields has been described as a sensitive site in terms of planning. Having reviewed the site allocation document I think it is very difficult to get away from 'sensitive sites' in Oxford. Within the 17-site allocation specifically for housing alone, we have identified 7 that have significant site constraints: from residential allocation in Flood Zone 3b to issues concerning SSSI, Conservation Areas and Green Belt Land.

One greenfield site, allocated, on the southern edge of the city is entirely divorced from any existing residential area, with no pedestrian or cycle links and is adjoined by a railway line and dual carriageway. The Council has described the site as being 'very segregated from neighbouring communities' and, in fact, it was dismissed as inappropriate for residential development by an earlier Inspector. At the time, the Inspector stated that, in the event that additional housing land was required, there should be a comparative assessment of other sites. I cannot believe that Ruskin Fields has ever been compared to this site. If it had, it would surely have been included within the site allocation document.

With this backdrop, I am at a loss why it would appear that Ruskin Fields has been considered to be such a sensitive site that it did not warrant even a passing mention in the allocation document or accompanying papers.

As an aside to this, there has been lots of discussion over the resulting loss of green space if Ruskin Fields are developed. So, I am surprised that the council is proceeding with the loss of four sports fields to be replaced by housing, the justification being the 'the need and benefit of new housing'.

The bedrock of the planning process has always been to determine whether the benefits of a development outweigh any perceived or real harm it might cause. Ruskin is no more a sensitive site than many others that the Council has chosen to include within the allocation document. The

benefits of developing Ruskin Fields for housing are, on the other hand, real, immediate and substantial. They relate to providing desperately needed housing.

Oxford has been described as a city with London house prices and Midlands wages. 68% of all households in Oxford have an income below that required to buy a house, and have to rely on market-level rent. This means an annual shortfall of between 1,981 and 4,884 affordable homes in Oxford. The Sites and Housing DPD Affordable Housing Background Paper sums the situation up: 'the rate at which affordable housing is built in Oxford will never keep up with the new and existing need for affordable homes'. This is a worrying scenario; indeed, it is shameful in a such a humane and civilized city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The same background paper demonstrated a heavy skew towards the development of smaller sites, particularly of sites of 1-4 dwellings, with the majority of sites being developed below the affordable housing threshold of 10 houses; These smaller sites are invaluable in increasing housing stock, but the bottom line is that, at the moment, most of the housing developments in Oxford do not contribute to affordable housing. It is the larger sites that do - sites such as that at Ruskin Fields.

You have an opportunity tonight, to add 150 units to the Oxford housing market and, most significantly, up to 75 desperately need affordable homes for the working people of Oxford. You may think that we have placed too much emphasis on affordable housing; our answer to that is, "someone has to if you will not"

The time has come to vote with your heart – to vote with your conscience. Don't allow a development opportunity to be missed.

Would a brave soul please move this evening to include Ruskin Fields in either the Barton Area Action Plan and/or the Site Allocation and Housing DPD and would a second brave soul please second this. Would every one of you then please think long and hard what you are doing here tonight. You have it in your power to do real good, to make a genuine difference to people who are homeless or inadequately housed. That's what you were elected for. Now it's up to you.

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