

Committee Address

Ruskin's intentions remain the same today as when we started out on this process: to assist in creating a strong and vibrant community on the Barton strategic site and allowing more people to enjoy and to benefit from the fields, and of course to provide much needed housing for the people of Oxford.

Ruskin Fields fields at the moment are unused and have no real function. They are thin in ecological terms, have no special interest and cannot only be preserved, but enhanced by careful and sympathetic development that preserves wildlife corridors and views, diversifies planting and introduces new water features. Our masterplan shows clusters of housing round an open central area that reflects the character of grain of Old Headington and nestled largely in a dip on the site, buffered from the sound of the by-pass.

Ruskin Fields central location could also create safe, effective and usable pedestrian and cycle links through our fields; which is even more significant now due to the stalemate between the City and County Councils over transforming the ring road. We have demonstrated through our Masterplan that it is possible to create an exemplar development on Ruskin Fields that enhances the Old Headington Conservation Area and allows our local neighbouring communities of Northway, Barton, Old Headington and new neighbours on the strategic site access to enjoy the fields.

A do nothing approach is short-sighted and backward looking. Our vision is to allow more people to enjoy and to benefit from the fields. Our Masterplan, underpinned by a Design Rationale and Transport Statement explaining the access arrangements approved by Oxfordshire County Council Highways Department, has demonstrated how Ruskin Fields could be developed in a manner that enhances the Old Headington Conservation Area and gives some meaning and more purpose to the fields.

The councils re-ran Sustainability Appraisal includes two objectives to "meet local housing needs by ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to live in a decent home" and "to reduce poverty and social exclusion." The council do acknowledge that Ruskin Fields would have a positive effect in relation to these objectives, but does not properly address the contribution that developing Ruskin Fields could make to open space provision in this part of Oxford.

The Oxford Core Strategy policy CS21 states that 'The City council will seek to maintain an overall average of 5.75 ha of publicly accessible green space per 1,000 population.' The report into open space provision commissioned by the council; The Scott Wilson Green Space Study (February 2007) indicates that there is a shortfall in relation to meeting this standard in the area around Ruskin Fields.

The report recommends addressing the open space shortfall in this part of Oxford by creating a park of city significance in the Marston/Northway area by linking a number of open spaces together, including Dunstan Park, to which the proposed open space on Ruskin Fields of 2.87 ha could make a significant contribution. This would be an important area, with a distinct character, which would be a significant asset to the areas of open space in Oxford. The opportunity to make a significant contribution towards meeting the open space deficit in this part of Oxford is a particular benefit of the Ruskin Fields proposals which is not recognized in the Council's Addendum to the Sustainability Appraisal (July 2012).

The council has assessed the impact of its own strategic site on biodiversity as a positive effect with a significant negative effect for both Ruskin's larger and smaller sites. The council says that Ruskin Fields in the case of birds and bats is of "city level importance". If this is the case, as the bird species that occur on Ruskin Fields site also occur on the councils other Greenfield Core Strategy Strategic development sites; so it follows that they too are of city level importance for birds.

In biodiversity terms, Ruskin Fields is similar to the Strategic site, in fact if you took away the ring road, Ruskin Fields run into the Barton Fields. We are bemused at how the council could come to two such different impact assessments for such similar fields.

Even though the access arrangements off Foxwell Drive have been agreed as acceptable by the County Highways, the council has assessed the smaller scheme in transport terms, as having a "negative effect", yet by contrast the councils assessment of the strategic site is assessed as "uncertain" The Sustainability Appraisal goes on to state that the Foxwell Drive access to the fields would create an additional 32 trips in and out, in the peak morning hours, and 37 trips in the evening peak hour. By contrast, in the morning and evening peak hours, the new Barton Development will generate 424 movements on Fettiplace Road and Barton Village Road. We are unsure as to how such a rate of trip generation could be assessed as "uncertain" on the strategic site, and the much lower trip generation at Ruskin Fields being assessed as having a "negative impact".

We still believe that the council has not assessed Ruskin Fields in a fair manner and have submitted representations to this end.

You could decide to go with your officer recommendation and approve the revised policies and Sustainability Appraisal. It is our view that the Planning Inspector would not be able to find the revised policies justified or deliverable in terms of achieving the objectives of the Barton AAP and she has virtually said as much; this, together with a biased and unjustified Sustainability Appraisal, would mean that there is a risk that the Planning Inspector would not be able to find the Barton AAP sound. This would result in a long, delay to the delivery of housing at Barton, probably not achieving an adopted document until the end of 2013 at the earliest.

We believe that we have submitted as part of this Public Examination additional information that clearly demonstrates the "do nothing" approach brings least benefits to local communities and the wider city of Oxford. An exemplar development that enhances Old Headington Conservation Area, increasing the fields' accessibility is the more sensible course of action.

The detailed level of information submitted as part of the Barton AAP will enable you to deviate from your officer's recommendation and allocate Ruskin Fields either within the Barton AAP or as a stand-alone site within the Site and Housing Plan.