

Sushilla Dhall – Address to Council
Damage to Port Meadow

I speak to you today because to date 1,650 signatures have been put to the petition entitled 'Port Meadow Damaged Views' which you will all have had an opportunity to read the wording of. You will, I hope, have read the comments on the petition, and seen the strength of local feeling about this issue.

For centuries Port Meadow has been a place of refuge and rest for the people of Oxford, accessible to everyone, from town, gown and far afield, from other cities, other countries and most of all locally. It has EU heritage status because of its uniquely beautiful and wildlife-protecting nature. It is deservedly greatly loved, being a large open meadow with views, until recently, of the Dreaming Spires, which could be seen, until recently, behind a row of mature trees. This year has seen the shameful destruction of that aspect of Port Meadow, so that now it can only be enjoyed if you walk or stand with your back to the entire south east corner. From Wolvercote to Oxford city, the view has this year been ruined by a blank row of barrack-like blocks, intended as student housing. In the evening the setting sun gleams on the horizontal row of rooftops which appears unbroken, and the much-loved view of the spire of St Barnabas can no longer be seen as the landmark of Jericho from Port Meadow.

It is clear that once these buildings are up and running the light pollution from them, which will be clearly visible across Port Meadow, is going to mean the impact of this carelessly approved development is devastating all day and all night, all year round.

Oxford City Council decided to give this bigger scheme planning permission on the back of an extant permission dating from the 1990s. As such, it was decided that there need be no Environmental Impact Assessment. The City Council decided that this was 'not a sensitive area and the impact could be mitigated.' With these few words miles of heritage was vandalised.

Responsibility needs to be taken. I'd like to know how many councillors have bothered to go and see what has been done in their name, and whether they are justly ashamed of it. It is bad enough to justify a revocation of planning permission. But in the short term, that Environmental Impact Assessment needs to happen. It should have happened before, and should happen now, partly to ensure a sense of real responsibility for this is taken, and partly to quantify the damage to the whole precious and now degraded area.

'Impact can be mitigated' was what was agreed by this Council in giving permission for this incredibly ugly development. How can this mitigation be done? The mature trees in front of the buildings barely cover the view. Even before the development was this high and when the trees in front of it had leaves, the buildings rose ugly and monotonous well above the treeline. How is this going to be mitigated? And I mean now, not in 30 years time and only in summer. How can the view of the spires be restored? Where is the plan to show in detail how mitigation of this dreadful mess can be achieved.?

Why did nobody know about this? Why did local councillors not tell local groups and people about it? I saw no sign on any lamppost, no article in any council or political newsletter, heard nothing at any local group meeting. As far as I can tell only Cripsey Meadow Allotment holders had any idea, and even they were not aware of the blight this would actually be. Why was there no proper consultation? Does this council know what consultation means? Does this council know that consultation means people need to know what is happening before they can comment?

The plans for this development show the 'view cone from Wolvercote' with a thin red line drawn below the treeline to indicate no damage to the view. This was treachery, designed to make it look as if there would be no impact to the view, and councillors are elected to protect us from this type of robbery. Of course the view, that is meant to be protected, has been enormously damaged.

From Wolvercote these buildings can be seen raising their ugly roofs to damage the view. From nearer and even from the other side of the river the view is destroyed. Please let the public know what you are going to do in the face of this miserable loss, of views, heritage, and of trust in you.