

To: City Executive Board 9th April 2014

Item No:

Report of: Head of City Development

Title of Report: Oxford Stadium, Sandy Lane,
Proposed Conservation Area

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To explain the purpose of conservation area designation and to set out reasons for proposing to designate Oxford Stadium a conservation area

Key decision: No

Report Approved by:

Finance: David Watt

Legal: Michael Morgan

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 (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (as amended)

Recommendation(s):

To designate Oxford Stadium, Sandy lane a Conservation Area. The extent of the area to be as shown on the plan attached as Appendix 1.

Background

1. At its meeting on the 10th July 2013 City Executive Board resolved to include the Stadium on the Oxford Heritage Asset Register as a 'locally designated heritage asset'. Having identified the heritage significance

the site holds officers have been considering how to best manage the area so that its heritage values can be enjoyed by present and future generations.

2. In this respect the question of its suitability for designation as a conservation area falls to be considered.

The Council's Duty to Consider Areas for Designation as Conservation Areas

3. The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 identifies the statutory responsibilities of local planning authorities with regard to the designation and management of the historic environment. Section 69 of the Act states:

(1) Every local planning authority—

(a) shall from time to time determine which parts of their area are areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance, and

(b) shall designate those areas as conservation areas.

(2) It shall be the duty of a local planning authority from time to time to review the past exercise of functions under this section and to determine whether any parts or any further parts of their area should be designated as conservation areas; and, if they so determine, they shall designate those parts accordingly.

4. English Heritage explains (Understanding Place, 2010) that identification of areas suitable for designation can arise in a number of ways:

- Studies in response to development threats;
- For masterplanning and as a part of evidence gathering for the local development plan;
- Via local communities and neighbourhood planning.

5. It explains (Understanding Place, 2010) that there are many different types of special architectural and historic interest that can lead to designation of an area such as:

- A part of a town;
- An area linked to a particular industry or philanthropist;
- Areas that have a particular local interest;
- An area reflecting a particular architectural style or traditional building material;

- public realm, parks and gardens (though not the wider landscape);
 - open areas particularly where character and appearance relates to historic fabric.
6. As part of the process towards such designation there is a requirement to prepare a detailed analysis of the special interest of the area to inform and justify any council decision to formally designate a conservation area. This analysis has been carried out following English Heritage's advice¹ and has been prepared in order to understand the heritage significance of the study area and how it is valued (see **Appendix 2**). It describes the history and role of greyhound stadia and the history of the development of Oxford Stadium, its architecture, character of buildings and spaces, its current condition and assesses its heritage significance.
 7. It has been prepared with assistance from local community members, who have provided access to historical information and photographic archives.
 8. A draft document was issued for consultation on the 10th March 2014, at the time of writing this report, for a two week period.

National context

9. The physical survivals of our past are important. They hold archaeological, historic, architectural and aesthetic interest that people recognise and value – our historic towns and villages, country houses, historic parks and gardens. The C20th (ironically, as much of it is within living memory) is often the most undervalued and vulnerable period of building and landscaping (English Heritage: Understanding Place 2012). It thus is less well recorded and understood than other areas, which may be of earlier periods in history.
10. English Heritage comments (Sports and Recreation Buildings: Designation Selection Guide, 2012) that sport and recreation play a major role in modern life and that historic buildings in these categories can therefore elicit strong emotional and sentimental responses. *'At best, buildings for sport and recreation can be structures of architectural elegance, imbued with considerable social history interest. More commonly they are merely functional in appearance. Yet many of*

¹ English Heritage Conservation Principles 2008

'English Heritage – Understanding Place, an introduction 2010

'English Heritage – Understanding Place: Historic Area Assessments in a Planning and Development Context , 2010

those that survive – and the losses have been considerable – transcend mere utility, and have a character all of their own’.

11. English Heritage explains that following recent studies (*‘Played in Britain’* EH) sports and recreation buildings are only now beginning to be better understood and facilities such as swimming pools, drill halls, lidos and spectator stands are reasonably well researched to help determine benchmarks for understanding significance, though other sites, particularly those that incorporate more ephemeral and short lived structures remain less well understood.
12. The Greyhound stadium is a nationally loved building type expressive of developments in interwar mass culture and entertainment (Walthamstow Greyhound Stadium- list descriptions, **Appendix 3**), which with Speedway was for a period the 2nd most popular leisure pursuit. Nevertheless, their numbers have seen a sharp decline in recent years with only 25 licensed stadia remaining within the UK, of which by no means all have a historic pedigree or profile that compares with Oxford Stadium. As such the stadium should be considered as an important representative of a form of development that is at risk nationally.

Oxford context

13. There are currently 17 conservation areas in Oxford, covering the historic core of the city, the medieval and C19th suburbs, and the medieval ring of villages around the city. These areas capture nearly 1000 years of architectural and social history and include an unusually high proportion (relative to the national context) of listed post-war buildings.
14. The 20th century and the coming of the motor industry represents a significant period of change and growth in Oxford and the development of suburbs to provide housing for workers in the motor and associated industries. This period of Oxford’s history is not represented to any significant extent as part of the existing regime of heritage protection. A basic premise for protection is the concept of a site or buildings holding ‘special interest’. Because survival rates of examples of the 20th century period are higher, and the lack of architectural distinction more prevalent, there has to be a greater degree of selection to ensure that the principles of heritage management are not devalued and this explains why these parts of Oxford are not protected in the same way as other historic periods. However, where appropriate in the identification of elements of our built environment that hold special interest it is desirable to ensure cross cultural representation.

15. The areas of interwar suburban housing are supported by a range of entertainment and leisure facilities that provide evidence of the way those communities lived and spent their leisure time.
16. The stadium is one such facility that holds interest in part because of the rudimentary and ephemeral nature of the buildings – this represents so effectively the attraction of both greyhound racing and Speedway as a high thrill short-lived leisure experiences for those working in the motor and associated industries. The nature of the materials also reflects the central consideration of the speculative commercial developer where expediency and speed of construction were essential in securing a financial return. The simplicity of the structures is part of the modernist ideal of absence of elaboration and decoration. The surviving structures embody the collective memory of those communities and how the site has adapted to changing circumstances. This adaptability to changing audiences and local community needs is reflected in the way the site is valued by present communities.

Summary of Assessment of the Suitability of the Area for Designation as a Conservation area

17. Features that contribute to the area's special historic and architectural interest
 - The site has been used by the community for greyhound-racing and Speedway with a history of use since 1939 (opened by Lord Denham and evidence of an earlier unregulated flapping track in the same location).
 - The location and character of the stadium illustrate the socio-economic character of Oxford's eastern suburbs during the C20th and, therefore, have historical interest through their associations with its community.
 - The area is representative of inter-war sport and entertainment within the city as part of Oxford's early C20th growth in response to development as a manufacturing centre, representing an important stage in the development of the city as a whole.
 - The area is unique in the city as an early C20th stadium used by the public and with strong associations with the local residential community (two other stadia White Hart Lane and the Manor Ground have been lost).
 - The area provides association with Speedway teams (Oxford Cheetahs among others) and competitors that were/are nationally

renowned and with their supporters contributing to local identity and providing historical interest.

- The area provides association with national level Speedway competitions and is seen as an internationally prestigious venue within the sport providing historical interest.
- Association with supporters of Greyhound Racing and with nationally and regionally significant competitions and competitors (Greyhounds and their trainers).
- Association with particular neighbourhoods and communities of Oxford (East Oxford, Cowley and Blackbird Leys).
- The types of building in the area as a group illustrate the use, but also the development and evolution of the site and activities.
- The number of stadia for both greyhound racing and Speedway has fallen dramatically in the late 20th century and early 21st century. The Oxford Stadium is now a rare example and is unique in the City and County, in terms of the historic sports it represents. As such, the historic and architectural interest of the stadium would be considered as special in the local and national context.
- Use for other sport: The area also has associations with other sports including flat track racing, stock car racing, American Football and go-cart racing which add to its historical interest.

18. Character and Appearance: A stadium for Greyhound Racing, Speedway and other Sports

- The survival of original structures of the stadium (or representative replacements) provides evidence of the greyhound and speedway activities that have taken place since, at least, 1939 and help in understanding the site and how it was used.
- The surviving Tote building is one of only 9 such structures remaining in the country and preserves its historic form as constructed in the 1930s and its relationship with the track, albeit with alterations to enable its use as office space. As such it contributes considerable architectural interest to the area. The use of the Totalisator or Tote was unique to Greyhound Stadia and represents a feature that contributed to the early success of the sport. As such, its survival adds to the historic interest of the area as an historic venue for Greyhound Racing.
- The Stadium Grandstand building frames the racetrack space and is built on the site of the two former grandstands, illustrating both

the continuity of the site's use and the evolution of facilities to serve the changing needs of the sport and the spectators.

- Terraces survive. These provide an immediate connection with the early days of both main sports and are essentially unchanged since the late 1930s preserving the closeness of spectators to the action of races and shared experience with spectators past, providing considerable historic interest. Their long sweeping curves and use of concrete reflect the utilitarian and unadorned modernist ideals of the inter-war period contributing to the area's architectural interest. The covered tunnel to the speedway pits is a distinctive feature of the stadium creating a point of drama as competitors enter from the pits beyond and shares the materials and simple forms of the terraces and therefore also contributes to the area's architectural and historic interest.
- Ancillary buildings survive. Ancillary buildings including turnstiles, the sheds of the greyhound paddocks and the Directors' Bar are evocative of the development of the site and its long history of use as a sporting venue, including both surviving early structures and appropriate later replacements that have preserved the character of the stadium as a sporting venue. These contribute to the historical interest of the stadium, whilst the former Directors' Bar contributes architectural interest by illustrating the historic materials and building forms that characterised the early days of the stadium and its 'ephemeral' architecture.
- Speedway sheds survive. The sheds of the Speedway pits are both an element of the functional infrastructure of the stadium and have been a focus for both the team members and supporters who commonly interacted in this area providing historical interest.
- Open central area framed by buildings and ancillary activities and preserving the alignments of racetracks that have been used since the 1930s. This feature provides a connection with the past sporting events that have taken place which is evocative for past competitors and supporters, as well as providing present users with a connection to this past and therefore contributes to the historic interest of the stadium
- The ephemeral nature of the buildings, often using prefabricated, low cost elements is representative of buildings associated with the sport historically and their adaptability to changing circumstances, which also heightens the rarity value if any of the earlier structures survive.

- The location and character are closely comparable to those of other similar stadia elsewhere, which are (or were) generally located near to or within working class residential areas or manufacturing districts, providing workers access to sports that were affordable for both spectators and participants and requiring relatively small spaces for venues (compared to horse racing), as well as the attraction of potential prize-money.
- The stadium's architectural character, made up of simple structures reflects the general ephemeral nature of sporting buildings throughout the 20th century with a general absence of architectural pretension.
- The character of the space of the track and surrounding stands reflects the close setting of spectators to racing that, historically, was a key attraction of the stadia. This is well preserved in the surviving 1930s stands and the space of the tracks, albeit with renewed surfaces.

19. Character And Appearance: Location and context

- The historic context provides understanding of medieval routes out of the city and Enclosure Act changes, development of railway connections and the process of development of the industrial suburb of Cowley over the countryside beyond the edge of the city.
- Watlington Road; this is an historic route from Oxford to Henley and London, reduced in importance in the late C18th by reorganisation of the regional road network, which made this area a backwater until industrialisation in the late 19th and early 20th century.
- Sandy Lane; a straight route forming the frontage to the stadium complex with an alignment that was established as a consequence of enclosure of open fields in 1817 and providing a remnant of the rural landscape that the industrial uses and later suburbs expanded across.
- Branch railway line; the railway line and embankment to the north were established in 1864 attracting industrial development and associated activity to the villages just outside the city.
- Industrial development from 1860s; The site lies on the edge of a district of former and current heavy manufacturing associated with car manufacturing including both Morris Motors and Pressed Steel and now Unipart and BMW Mini. The site of the Oxford Bus Company Depot, to the east of the stadium was previously a small iron works. The site is one of a number of sites with sports and

recreation uses that formed a fringe to this manufacturing area, either supported by the factories or exploiting the potential market of workers.

- Blackbird Leys; – The first houses of the Blackbird Leys suburb faced onto the stadium site and were built in 1958. As an existing social venue the stadium has provided a focus for the social interaction of the estate and contributes to the local sense of identity and the character of the wider suburb. This has been supported by the variety of community uses that the stadium has served.

20. The Desirability of Preserving or Enhancing the Character and Appearance: The following factors are considered to make the preservation and enhancement desirable:

- Sustaining community value: The stadium is valued by both the local community of Oxford and a wider, national and international community of supporters of both greyhound racing and Speedway as a source of their community cohesion and identity.
- Local distinctiveness and identity: As an important historic site of sporting competitions with strong associations for the local community, but also providing connections with teams who have represented Oxford and as a focus for visitors to the city the area, including its use, its historical and architectural interest and the character and appearance that flow from them makes an important contribution to the distinctiveness and identity of Blackbird Leys and Oxford as a whole. It is representative of the development of Oxford and its communities in early and later 20th century.
- Rarity: The area is an example of a nationally rare form of development and retains an example of a totalisator or tote building that is one of only 9 original examples in the UK which preserves its historical association with the track and surrounding stands.
- Importance of spatial character to understanding of significance: The ability to understand the area as a heritage assets is dependant on preserving its spatial character including not only the individual buildings but also the spaces between them such as the tracks, pits and greyhounds paddocks that illustrate the purpose of the buildings and contribute to the special historic interest and character and appearance of the area.

Justification

21. The architectural and historic interest of the site has already been recognised in its designation as a local heritage asset. This has been assessed as being of special historic interest locally and, indeed, nationally.
22. The collective interest of the buildings, illustrating the past use and development of the site as a regionally and at times nationally important sporting venue is considered to cumulatively provide a special architectural interest.
23. The site is not a single building but a group of buildings around a central open space. This needs to be recognised as an area rather than a single object, with a character that is largely a result of the relationship between the buildings and spaces reflecting the past history of use.
24. The area sustains features of character and appearance that flow from the special historic and architectural interest and are considered desirable to preserve and enhance due to the importance of the spatial relationship between the features of the area to understanding their individual and cumulative historic and architectural interest, their rarity, their contribution to local distinctiveness and identity and their value to the local community as a heritage asset.
25. The proposed conservation area boundary is shown on the plan attached as Appendix 1. Appendix 2 contains an historical account of greyhound racing, the history of Oxford Stadium and analysis of heritage significance.
26. Designation means that when the City Council considers a planning application it must pay special regard to the desirability to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the area. It does not presume that change must not happen and the National Planning Policy Framework explains that a proposal that would harm the character or appearance may be acceptable if the public benefits that would flow from a development are sufficient to outweigh that harm.

Consultation

27. On line consultation with the local community and site owners, inviting comments on the draft appraisal and proposal to designate a conservation area commenced on 10th March 2014 for a period of two weeks. The results of this consultation are not available at the time of preparing this report, but will be reported at the meeting.

Conclusion

28. Oxford Stadium has intrinsic historic interest as a rare survival of a greyhound and speedway stadium that represents the collective memory of the local communities, past and present. This interest has already been recognised with the site's inclusion on the Oxford Heritage Asset Register. Further analysis and research carried out has increased our understanding of the site and its role as a leisure and sporting venue. Assessed against the legislative framework for conservation area designation and best practice and guidance officers are satisfied that the special architectural and historic interest the site holds is sufficient for designation as a conservation area. Designation of the site as a representative of Oxford's C20th social and economic history would fulfil the objectives of conservation area legislation, complementing the other parts of Oxford already designated.

Recommendation

To designate Oxford Stadium, Sandy Lane a Conservation Area, the extent of the area to be as shown on the plan attached as Appendix 1 to this report

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Background papers:

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