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Piers Scrimshaw-Wright
The Oxford Science Park
Robert Robinson Avenue
Oxford OX4 4GA
United Kingdom

30 May 2019

Our reference: DCC/1031

Oxford County Council: Plot 16, The Oxford Science Park

Dear Piers Scrimshaw Wright,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to advise on this proposal at the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP) Review on 16 May 2019.

Context

The Oxford Science Park has been growing rapidly in response to demand for office and laboratory space in the city. Plot 16 has been identified as a suitable site to deliver additional office and laboratory space, along with significant public realm. The scheme presents an important opportunity for The Oxford Science Park to demonstrate its commitment to delivering an exciting and forward-thinking development that will attract a variety of small and growing businesses that are at the forefront of science, technology and research.

Sited on the edge of The Oxford Science Park, Plot 16 is located between Littlemore Brook, which is a wildlife corridor, to the south and a railway line and residential community to the north. The railway line is currently used for freight but there are plans to renew the Cowley Branch Line service, which was a passenger service. If this is realised, a station will be included immediately to the north of Plot 16. This will have a significant impact on this site and the ways in which people travel to The Oxford Science Park, should it be delivered.

Summary

We welcome the pride The Oxford Science Park clearly takes in its campus and the desire to create an innovative development on Plot 16 that can meet the requirements of its anticipated users. In order to achieve this aim, we advise that Plot 16 must be integrated into the Science Park as well as the wider area. It must also be designed to accommodate new uses and users as the wider area and user requirements evolve. We do not think that the design is successfully achieving these aims as yet. We note that The



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Oxford Science Park is working with a masterplan for the overall site that was developed many years ago, and that it has not been updated. We urge the Science Park to work with consultants to develop a revised masterplan as a priority. As part of this, we recommend that the project team take a step back and undertake research and analysis of who the site's anticipated users are, how they will use the site and what they need, in order to enhance their experience here. We suggest developing a strategy that maps users' movements and activities within Plot 16 and to the wider Science Park and the consequent hierarchy of spaces. This, along with an analysis of the wider area, will help to develop the site layout, as well as the height and massing of the buildings and, consequently, a scheme that works well for its users and the wider community. For example, we think that, if each of the four proposed building blocks were narrower, improved internal and external environments could be created by increasing daylighting within the buildings, increasing external views, and creating more generous pathways and coherent spaces.

We recognise that it is currently unclear if the Cowley Branch Line passenger service will resume in the future. However, we suggest the project team ensure that the site could accommodate a future train station, if it were to come forward. This should include provisions for a station and ancillary requirements such as servicing, bus stops, etc.

Programme

We are concerned that the timetable for the project is tight and the proposals presented do not provide sufficient detail for a detailed planning application in early June, as planned. We urge the project team to revise the programme to allow time for carrying out the recommendations outlined in this letter. This will enable them to deliver a place that better integrates into its context, while also working well for its users and the wider community.

Site layout

We think it is important that Plot 16 is integrated and connected to the rest of The Oxford Science Park, while also creating distinct and coherent spaces and routes within its own boundary. In the first instance, we advise that a new overall masterplan is required for The Oxford Science Park. This will help inform how Plot 16 fits in with the wider campus - physically, aesthetically and in its character.

Within the site boundary, we recommend that the role, hierarchy and characters of each individual spaces and routes within Plot 16 are identified and designed accordingly. For example, we are concerned by the tightness of the brook-side path and how busy it may become. Should the station be built here, this volume of use is likely to intensify and exacerbate the issue. Additionally, pedestrians and cyclists do not always mix well and a single path for both may not create a pleasurable user experience for either. As part of the masterplan strategy, we urge the team to research the volume of use of the proposed

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routes through the site as this will help decide their importance and, consequently, their character.

Currently, the central open space is the principal open space on the site. We think this does not reflect the way in which the wider area around the site is developing. For example, there are plans for residences to the east and, should the Cowley Branch Line station be realised, the open space to the east of Plot 16 will likely become the most significant public realm. Therefore, we recommend that a better façade to the east is considered and this space is designed, so that it can accommodate future changes and demand in the wider area of the development.

The open spaces proposed for Plot 16 do not complement the linear alignment of the elements that surround it, and the river and the rail line. We think this disrupts the coherence of the site and that further work is required on the hierarchy of spaces and to improve their relationship to their surroundings. We encourage the design team to continue to explore a layout that works best for the site in terms of coherence and supporting the user experience.

Overall, we think that the buildings could be narrower in their east-west orientation and the size of the open spaces could be revisited, to improve the quality of the internal and external spaces.

Landscape, movement and connectivity

We recommend that a landscape and visual impact assessment be undertaken.

Plot 16 has a rich natural environment, with the Littlemore Brook providing an attractive setting for the development. However, we are concerned that the proximity of the buildings to the brook, and a tight -- and possibly busy -- path along it, will compromise the wildlife corridor and the quality of the brook. We also recommend exploring how the height and lighting for the building/car park and path itself could impact the wildlife corridor. We think it is critical that the development's impact on the natural environment is thoroughly understood and every effort made to robustly protect it.

As mentioned above, we think the hierarchy of the routes within the site and connectivity to the surrounding area need to be resolved and recommend that a movement strategy is developed. For example, the existing bridge connecting Plot 16 to the wider Science Park is three-metre wide and we suggest that there is potential for it to be wider, as it is likely to be more heavily used when this development is completed. We also recommend considering how easy it is to find the bridge and that further clarity is required about where the bridge leads in both directions and whether it is a public route or not. Within the site, the circulation strategy appears complex and confusing and we recommend creating a hierarchy of movement that supports staff interaction.

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We think further clarity is needed on how the inside of the buildings relate to the external spaces and who these spaces are for. We recommend that this is addressed to ensure potential users feel welcome and that the external spaces are well-used.

Should a railway station be delivered here and used by fans attending football matches, we also recommend that their exit from the station is made via the east of the station only, rather than via the exit on the platform directly leading to Plot 16. We think the latter exit will work better if it is restricted to staff and visitors of The Oxford Science Park only.

We welcome the desire to create spaces with different characters but advise that they need to be planned in greater detail and made to work much harder. In the first instance, we recommend researching and understanding the demographics of potential users and the activities that will be encouraged and supported here. We suggest that this is critical information for the site's brief that will contribute to greater success. For example, if the aim is to attract or cater to SMEs and a younger demographic, they tend to be resistant to spaces with a more corporate feel. In regard to the design of open spaces, people often prefer when office windows do not directly overlook to spaces where they might linger in their break-time.

It is our view that the snaking paths across the central, open green space may compromise the experience of those individuals and groups sitting on the grass as the movement of people in-front and behind them will likely to make them feel exposed.

Regarding gender-based differences, women tend to prefer spaces that are more intimate and where they feel more protected. Additionally, the proposals are for a single, large, open space with solid walls, but we advise that busy and well-used open spaces tend to have the quality of an outdoor room with softer edges. Smaller and broken up spaces will contribute to creating this quality. The centre of open spaces does not tend to work well if the edges are not animated and programmed carefully. We recommend referring to Rachel Kaplan's work on the post-occupancy of pocket parks to inform the design's development.

We think that further clarity is required on the public and private spaces across the site and recommend that once uses are identified for each space it should be reflected in the design. This will instinctively facilitate their use. For example, the public cycle parking spaces might be better located outside, rather than inside the building, as the latter could lead to confusion about who is allowed to use it.

We advise that the tree and planting strategy should be cognisant of the prevalence of disease and specified products should be resilient to climate change.

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Architecture, height and massing

Further information is required regarding the scale and massing of the proposed buildings to better understand the impact of Plot 16 on the wider area. For example, we are concerned that the residences to the north of the site will be affected by the mass and height of the buildings, which we think may appear overdeveloped when viewed from that direction. In the absence of a landscape and impact assessment, it is currently difficult to judge this. We recommend that, with the help of a landscape and visual impact assessment, the design is developed in a way that allows for the site to integrate well into its surroundings.

We are concerned about the occupants' experience of using the buildings. While the surrounding environment and outlooks are attractive, the depth of the buildings means that there is no visual connection to the outdoors from a significant proportion of the internal space. An equal concern is the lack of daylight that will penetrate into these deep buildings. We advise that the user experience is vital to the success of the buildings and recommend that narrower buildings, with good external views, are likely to work better. While this may mean squeezing the central public space, we do not think this would be beneficial if the internal spaces are improved without compromising the quality of the open spaces. We encourage the design team to look at many recent built examples of similar developments that bring light and air into the depth of a development by introducing an atrium between linear blocks. Further, we encourage the team to explore ways in which the landscape and built form can be balanced to maximise the experience of both.

The elevations and fenestration should be driven by both internal use and external context. For example, we appreciate that the incorporation of laboratories, which tend to be introverted spaces, may influence the fenestration. However, we advise that the elevations facing the public space, specifically the one to the east if it were to become the primary space and include a café in the future, should be markedly different to the other façades. We also advise that the façade to the railway line and road may need to incorporate acoustic treatment in response to the possible noise pollution from cars and trains.

We think that the proposed materials for the buildings are appropriate.

Transport infrastructure and parking

We note the efforts The Oxford Science Park has made to promote sustainable transport to those travelling to this location, such as partnering with the Oxford Bus Company to support the PickMeUp bus service. However, we think the predominant method of travel to the site is likely to continue to be by car for the foreseeable future and, as a result, we acknowledge that Plot 16 will require a high amount of parking space. Should this



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requirement change, we recommend that the parking is designed to be flexible and to accommodate a use that could be of more value to the site and users in the future.

In addition to car use, we advise that there will still be those who travel using other modes of transport, such as walking, cycling and motorbikes. We recommend that vehicular pick up and drop off points should be designed to look and feel like public space that you drive over. We think that this will create a more democratic and higher-quality space while subtly encouraging and supporting alternative methods of travel to the site.

We are concerned about the road incorporated in the north of the site, as it appears to have the quality of an underpass access road. We think this is a route that requires considerable further thought and encourage the team to continue to work on the design that will provide an improved experience for users and not compromise the quality of this site as a whole.

Sustainability

In keeping with The Oxford Science Park's exemplary status, we think that it is possible for this project to achieve a BREAM rating of 'excellent', and we urge the project team to go beyond the Very Good status currently proposed.

We understand that some of the space may be used as laboratories and this, together with the possible noise issues from the north if the railway line is reintroduced, have led to a decision to have non-openable windows. However, we think that there is potential to have mixed-mode air-conditioning, with non-openable windows to the north, to allow for natural ventilation on the other façades. We appreciate this may involve a higher cost but encourage the project team to consider building this flexibility into the buildings. This will enhance the experience of the offices and increase sustainability credentials.

We advise that air source heat pumps are not as efficient as ground source ones and recommend that this is considered in the energy strategy.

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 contact us.

Yours sincerely,

Sabina Mohideen
Design Council Cabe Advisor



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Review process

Following a site visit, (and) discussions with the design team and local authority, the scheme was reviewed on 16 May 2019 by Jo van Heyningen (Chair), Paul Appleby, Maayan Ashkenazi, Jessica Bryne-Daniel, Martin Stockley and Nigel Wright. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.

Confidentiality

Since the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application, the advice contained in this letter is offered in confidence, on condition that we are kept informed of the progress of the project, including when it becomes the subject of a planning application. We reserve the right to make our views known should the views contained in this letter be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). If you do not require our views to be kept confidential, please write to dc.cabe@designcouncil.org.uk.

Attendees

Piers Scrimshaw-Wright	The Oxford Science Park
John Drew	Perkins+Will
Josemar Da Costa	Perkins+Will
David Blackwood-Murray	STUDIO DBM
Richard Knight	Hoare Lea
Emma Andrews	Savills UK
Michael Kemp	Oxford City Council
Gill Butter	Oxford City Council

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