

6 September 2020

East Area Planning Committee
Oxford City Council
St Aldates Chambers
109 St Aldate's
Oxford
OX1 1DS

By E-mail (democraticservices@oxford.gov.uk)

Dear Councillors and Officers,

Planning Application Number 2020/00856/FUL

We write regarding the above referenced planning application (the “**Application**”), our previous letter of 28 August 2020 and the East Area Planning Committee meeting on 2 September 2020 at which the Application was considered and approved (the “**Hearing**”).

Specification of Proposed New Gurdwara Premises

We have been asked by Oxford Gurdwara to comment on the specification of the proposed new Gurdwara premises from a religious worship and protocol perspective.

Having reviewed the ground floor and first floor plans with member architects and leaders of other Sikh places of worship, we make the following observations:

1. Shoe storage and hand washing facilities are provided for outside. This is not practical or safe during the winter months when it is cold and dark. It is conventional and expected that shoe storage and hand washing facilities are provided for internally.
2. The kitchen is provided for at the front of the premises, fronting onto London Road. A Gurdwara kitchen is akin to a commercial kitchen (as opposed to a residential or light community kitchen). The cooking facilities installed are commercial grade, including heavy duty commercial kitchen extractor plant. This will require commercial vents to exit onto the London Road frontage. We note that the first-floor plan indicates a riser for the kitchen’s extractor chimney. Commercial extractor ducts require inspection hatches at regular intervals to check for *inter alia* grease build up. Although routing the ducting in an enclosed duct in the prayer hall is acceptable in principle, it would not be in order to install inspection hatches in the prayer hall. This would compromise the sanctity of the prayer hall and of the holy scriptures. This concept is called “sucham” in Sikhism and is of paramount importance.
3. Sikh priests are often required to stay on-site at the Gurdwara – a common task is a non-stop recitation of the holy scriptures. This is performed in shifts, and between

each shift the priests are required to bathe and groom (as well as rest). The priest room indicated on the ground floor plan does not allow for any washing (specifically showering or bathing facilities) for the priests.

4. The first floor plan shows a male toilet adjacent to the prayer hall. Having toilet facilities in such close proximity to where the holy scriptures are read and put to rest is unconscionable. This comprises the “sucham” of the prayer hall and the holy scriptures.
5. The location of the holy scriptures’ resting place is also not appropriate. It is required and is conventional for worshippers to enter the prayer hall and walk a reasonable distance to show obeisance to the holy scriptures. This walk is analogous to a walk of penance (though without the connotations of sin). In the plan proposed, this would necessitate locating the holy scriptures at the far left of the prayer hall, adjacent to the indicated resting place. At the end of the day, when the holy scriptures are put to rest, it is conventional that the priest traverse the passage walked by worshippers and place the holy scriptures at rest at the far end of that passage. This would necessitate locating the resting place at the right side of the prayer hall. This last convention is not always observed, but it is strongly recommended when new Gurdwaras are being designed.

Although Oxford Gurdwara first contacted us in the weeks prior to the Hearing, we were only involved in respect of the ownership dispute and our interest in the Application was from that perspective. We were asked to look at and comment on the proposed plans after the Hearing. Had Oxford Gurdwara been properly consulted as a stakeholder in the Application, it would have been able to speak to us sooner and these comments could have been provided earlier in the process.

The Hearing

We watched the YouTube stream of the Hearing and were troubled by the intervention of Mr. Lalli for the applicant. As the Hearing attendees rightly recognised, the veracity of Mr. Lalli’s submissions is questionable. No doubt the committee and the Hearing attendees will have formed their own view but we want to put on record the following observations:

1. Mr. Lalli is not a trustee of Oxford Gurdwara – this is evident from the Charity Commission website;
2. The questions put to Mr. Lalli by the committee members were not accurately or faithfully translated, and similarly Mr. Lalli’s responses were not faithfully or accurately translated;
3. We were disappointed that Oxford Gurdwara’s representative was not given an opportunity to make further submissions whereas the applicant’s agent and Mr. Lalli were both given multiple opportunities to speak.

In the circumstances, in the interests of open democracy, we are of the view that the Application should be considered again by the Council's Planning Review Committee.

Yours faithfully,



Gurpreet Singh Anand
Executive Committee Member, Sikh Council UK

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| Cc: | Adrian Arnold, Head of Planning | Councillor Ben Lloyd-Shogbesan |
| | Councillor Sian Taylor | Councillor Christine Simm |
| | Councillor John Tanner | Councillor Roz Smith |
| | Councillor Mohammed Altaf-Khan | Mr KS Turna |
| | Councillor Shaista Aziz | Mr Akash Turna |
| | Councillor Nigel Chapman | Mr Simon Sharp |
| | Councillor Mary Clarkson | |

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