Stratfield Brake, Kidlington - Land Use Proposal

Possible lease to Oxford United football club

Consultation response, by Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS)

February 2022

POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) is a group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focussed primarily on planning and transport in Oxfordshire.

For more information go to *www.poetsplanningoxon.uk*

Summary

1. POETS welcome the vision of a successful, well-managed Oxford United football club that can be a good neighbour and an asset for the community. However, before a decision is taken about a possible move from the Kassam Stadium to Stratfield Brake there are numerous issues and questions that need to be addressed. Without satisfactory answers to these, there is a danger of an outcome that is damaging to the environment, extremely costly to Oxfordshire taxpayers, and fails to secure the long term future of Oxford United.
2. This paper sets out some of the issues that need to be considered before any decisions are taken.

History

3. The Kassam Stadium was built on land removed from the Green Belt by Oxford City Council. The aim was to provide a permanent home for Oxford United, whose former Manor Ground in Headington was unable to meet new safety standards.
   a) Why was this not secured by the City Council?
   b) What can the City Council now do to ensure that its original case for securing a permanent stadium for Oxford United at Grenoble Road is honoured?
   c) Failing that, what guarantees could there be to ensure that history does not repeat itself at a new stadium?
   d) What would happen to the Kassam Stadium site if this proposal goes ahead?

Future Safeguards

4. The report to the County Council cabinet on 18 January states that “If the Club should cease to exist, the headlease will allow it [the land] to be leased to another professional football club”. This seems a worryingly vague commitment, particularly as a number of professional football clubs are currently in financial difficulties, some have gone into administration, and several are in foreign ownership. The ownership of Oxford United has changed a number of times in recent decades, and indeed it could be argued that it is the actions of past owners which have led to some of the problems facing the club.
5. Both Oxford United supporters and others are likely to want to see much stronger guarantees for the future of the site than are mentioned in the report to the County Council’s cabinet. This is especially so in relation to the current proposal, which involves developing land which is publicly owned, acquired for the specific purpose of keeping it open, and which is currently designated Green Belt. What are the exceptional circumstances that justify the proposed development and where is the evidence that all other reasonable options have been examined?
6. On the other hand, if Oxford United become more successful and gain promotion to the Championship or above, there are likely to be pressures to increase the capacity of the stadium above the currently proposed 18,000. How would this be accommodated?

Public Finances

7. Local authorities have a statutory duty (under S123 of the Local Government Act 1972) not to dispose of land other than for the best price that can reasonably be obtained. In order to reassure Oxfordshire taxpayers that this duty is being met, will the County Council seek an independent valuation of the land in question, both in its present state and with planning permission for the commercial uses under discussion? Without such a reassurance, there is a risk of an extremely valuable public asset effectively being given to a private company at a significant cost to Oxfordshire taxpayers.

Climate Emergency

8. All the local authorities involved in the possible relocation of Oxford United to Stratfield Brake (Oxfordshire County Council, Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council, and Kidlington Parish Council) have declared a climate emergency. They have stated that this should guide all their decisions. POETS look forward to seeing how this is reflected in their response to the Stratfield Brake proposal.

Carbon Impacts

9. The construction of a new stadium would inevitably have considerable carbon impacts, both in terms of materials and through the construction process. Given that there is already a functioning stadium at the Kassam, representing a significant quantity of embedded carbon, what assessment has been or will be undertaken of the relative carbon impacts of constructing a new stadium, together with a significant amount of commercial development, compared with remaining at the existing one?

Environment and biodiversity

10. Presumably the local authorities, given their stated objectives, will wish any development to contribute to the 2021 Environment Act's objective of securing biodiversity net gain. This is particularly important as the site appears to occupy an important strategic location in Oxfordshire's emerging Nature Recovery Network. How will the current proposal, which involves the development (for a football stadium, hotel, and other commercial uses) of some 18 hectares of land currently in use as woodland and sports fields, achieve this?

Green Belt

11. Oxfordshire County Council bought the land at Stratfield Brake in 1937 specifically to maintain a green space between Oxford and Kidlington. Since then the land has been designated as Green Belt, supposedly giving it even stronger protection; indeed, the inspector who conducted the recent local plan inquiry emphasised that his recommendations were intended to provide lasting boundaries for the Green Belt.
    a) Do the purposes for which the County Council originally purchased Stratfield Brake still apply?
    b) What would happen to the local sports clubs which currently use the land at Stratfield Brake?

Local Facilities

12. The current Oxford United stadium and associated development provide a range of facilities in a part of the city which is otherwise relatively short of them. In contrast, north Oxford is generally fairly well-served with recreational and other opportunities. What steps are proposed either to retain such facilities in Greater Leys or, if the proposed relocation does go ahead, to replace them?

Transport

13. What specific measures will be in place to ensure that the vast majority of those attending football matches travel by public transport or active modes? How will traffic and parking be managed to ensure no disruption to the local and strategic network and no nuisance to residents in Kidlington, north Oxford and the surrounding area?
14. The annex to this note below, illustrates some of the specific questions that will need to be addressed regarding transport issues.

Annex – Some of the transport questions to be addressed

a) How do people currently travel to the Kassam stadium and where do they come from?
b) How would this pattern of travel change at Stratfield Brake?
c) How much capacity exists at existing car parks, such as Water Eaton and Pear Tree Park & Rides on match days?
d) If park and ride car parks are full of football traffic on match days what impact will this have on traffic driving into Oxford – particularly on Saturdays? Conversely, if the car parks are already full of shoppers' cars by the time football supporters arrive, how will this be managed?
e) How long would it take for motorists to get out of any designated car parks after the match and how can people be persuaded to use them rather than parking elsewhere?
f) How would on-street parking in Kidlington and the wider area be managed on match days?
g) How would off-street car parks in the area – both private and public – including locations such as Cutteslowe Park be managed and controlled?
h) How would the additional demand for bus and train travel be met? How long would people have to wait for a bus or train after a match?