

BLACKBIRD LEYS PARISH COUNCIL

Response to Oxford Local Plan 2040 Proposed Submission Draft

January 2024

Introduction

1. The Parish Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Proposed Submission Draft (Regulation 19) Consultation on the Oxford Local Plan 2040 (OLP). It is mindful that it must address its comments to the soundness of the plan, per NPPF §35, and has chosen to focus on a small number of the most important strategic policy matters of concern.

General **Overarching Comments - No need to add to database**

2. Although too late to restructure now, the document very much looks at the city as a whole, in respect of its vision and objectives. It only considers its constituent communities in respect of infrastructure planning (in its four ‘quadrants’) or where they coincide with its five Areas of Focus. Thereafter, its proposals are site specific, with no attempt to draw their cumulative effects together for communities like Blackbird Leys.

3. This makes the implications of the OLP difficult for us to grasp, having to join a number of spatial and development management policy dots to determine if the OLP has a vision for Blackbird Leys in 2040, and if it does, how its policies will contribute to achieving that vision. Our task is made more difficult by the OLP proposals for our ‘South Infrastructure Area’ having little specific to say about how the Cowley Branch Line, the future of the Kassam and our new District Centre relate to the Grenoble Road and Northfield strategic allocations around our immediate edge. Only its §8.59 makes reference, but stating only, “It is important that all opportunities are taken to ensure that these strategic developments on the city’s boundaries are well connected” falls far short of a clear understanding of the challenge.

4. This combination of primarily housing but also public transport, community and commercial infrastructure proposals will have a profound effect on our community over the next two decades and change it perhaps more than any other part of the city. But this is not recognised in the OLP, let alone explained or justified as a whole for our area. Instead, there are aspirations for how future access and movement patterns through, to and from Blackbird Leys may be made sustainable, but little that indicates the OLP’s proposals for the many other potential land use and development effects. We are already concerned about local access to healthcare facilities, which are over-capacity and with any additional capacity at Cowley being inaccessible to most residents.

5. More generally, the OLP treats every part of the city as the same. Its development management policies – notably relating to affordable housing and parking – have no nuance to reflect the different locational, spatial and demographic characteristics of places like Blackbird Leys compared to much of the rest of the city.

6. To fill what may remain a vital weakness in the adopted OLP in due course, the Parish Council has resolved to bring forward a Neighbourhood Plan for the whole Parish (BBLNP) in 2024/25. It will endeavour to tackle the questions left unanswered by the OLP and to interrogate and supplement the OLP evidence base to satisfy the local community that a coherent, sustainable and acceptable vision for Blackbird Leys can be secured. It will refine OLP policies

and fill gaps in thinking that the OLP has left to achieve that vision. We hope to have made sufficient progress on the BBLNP to inform our participation in the OLP examination at the end of 2024.

Spatial Proposals

7. We have noted that the OLP spatial proposals that fall within the Parish boundary are:

- Policy CBLAOF: Cowley Branch Line and Littlemore Area of Focus
- Policy SPS3: Overflow Car Park, Kassam Stadium
- Policy SPS6: Sandy Lane Recreation Ground
- Policy SPS9: Blackbird Leys Central Area
- Policy SPS10: Knights Road
- Policy G1: Protection of the Green Infrastructure
- Policy G7: Flood risk and Flood Risk Assessments
- Policy HD1 Conservation Areas
- Policy C1: Town Centre Uses

8. In addition, immediately adjoining our boundary are other spatial proposals in the OLP and in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035:

- Policy SPS1: ARC Oxford
- Policy SPS2: Kassam Stadium and Ozone Leisure Park
- Policy SPS4: MINI Plant Oxford
- Land South of Grenoble Road (South Oxfordshire Local Plan Policy STRAT11)
- Land at Northfield (South Oxfordshire Local Plan Policy STRAT 12)

9. We estimate that the combination of the OLP and South Oxfordshire Local Plan proposals will more than double the population of our part of the city, with all that means for how we live, work, shop and access local services and facilities to enjoy life in our community.

10. Although we support the OLP ambitions to deliver this change by promoting active travel, we are very concerned that its success will crucially depend on the ability of the City Council (and its joint working with land interests and South Oxfordshire District Council and other public bodies) to manage that complexity and scale of change over the next two decades.

11. We now look at those policies of most importance to us:

Policy CBLAOF: Cowley Branch Line and Littlemore Area of Focus **Policy CBLAOF: unsound**

12. We welcome the possibility of the return of passenger rail services to the branch line and for a new East Oxford station on our northern edge. If delivered, it will enable residents to access the mainline services more easily and will provide a public transport alternative to accessing the city centre.

13. Our concern, however, is whether or not this infrastructure, on which many other local development proposals depend for their justification, will be delivered in a timely way. If we only see the development, and not this and other public transport improvements, then along with the 'low car' proposals of Policy C8, this will cause significant harm for our local community.

14. Given its importance to much of the southern area of the city, including its extensions into South Oxfordshire, we would have expected the OLP to have firmer proposals for this and other policies or how and when this infrastructure would be delivered and phased with the development of land that will contribute to funding it.

15. In passing, we also note that Policy SP51 of the adopted Local Plan for the Oxford Stadium has not been carried forward in this Area of Focus of the OLP. This is explained in OLP Background Paper 15b (Site Assessment Process) as the recent return of speedway and greyhound racing to the stadium has meant that enabling residential development on part of its car park may no longer be necessary. We will keep this under review as part of the BBLNP and may still provide a policy framework for this crucial sports, cultural and heritage asset for Oxford, rather than leave it to a 'windfall' planning application.

Policy SPS2 and SPS3: Kassam Stadium/Ozone Leisure Park and Overflow Car Park, Kassam Stadium

16. We recognise the potential for the Overflow Car Park land to be developed for housing along with the Kassam Stadium itself (outside our boundary) if the football club is relocated. However, as already noted, we are concerned that our area is losing a significant amount of publicly accessible open space (at Knights Road and possibly at Sandy Lane Recreation Ground – see below). This parcel of land may therefore be better suited to have a larger proportion remaining open space, perhaps to enable the relocation of the sports pitches from Sandy Lane.

17. More generally, the relocation of the football club should prioritise how the current controlled parking zone (CPZ), which relates only to the occasional use of the stadium, should be revised as part of a much wider consideration of how car use and parking should be practically managed in Blackbird Leys (see Policy C8 below).

18. On a point of detail, we note that Policy SPS2 does not require that vehicular access is safeguarded through the Kassam/Ozone site to enable access to the Overflow site over the existing Littlemore bridge.

Policy SPS6: Sandy Lane Recreation Ground **Policy SPS6: unsound**

19. As noted above, we acknowledge the strategic value of the reopening of the Cowley Branch Line and use of the land owned by Network Rail adjoining the Recreation Ground itself to deliver a new 'Oxford East' railway station. However, for such an important site, we would have expected the OLP to have determined if the existing sports pitches should be re-provided, and if so, where in this area, which will already be losing the nearby Knights Road recreation ground.

20. We are very concerned that, aside from their recreational value, the loss of the Recreation Ground to development will follow a pattern of loss of public and other open spaces in our area, at Knights Road and the Kassam Overflow Car Park area. We therefore believe that the existing sports pitches should be retained.

21. We therefore OBJECT to the allocation of the Recreation Ground for residential development unless the policy is modified to a) set out clearly its rationale, especially if it is assuming that residential development is needed to help pay for the Branch Line scheme and b) to propose where new land will be made available in a suitable and accessible location for the residents of Blackbird Leys or, failing that, to propose how and when our existing outdoor

recreation facilities will be upgraded to be able to meet the increased demand from a much larger local population.

Policy SPS9: Blackbird Leys Central Area **Policy SPS9: unsound**

22. We note that the Policies Map defines a larger area than the District Centre, including the library, the college, the health centre and the leisure centre. The policy allows for “a mixed-use development that includes town centre uses, start-up employment units, residential development (a minimum of 200 homes, which have already been consented) and community and educational facilities” in the defined area. It sets no upper limit on the scale of development that may be supported by this policy.

23. Although the policy states that, “Planning permission will not be granted for development that prejudices the comprehensive development of the whole site”, this principle has already been undermined by the District Centre scheme, which only covers part of the land shown. In the absence of “any regeneration plan for the Blackbird Leys area”, the policy will allow for the redevelopment of the remaining social infrastructure as a matter of principle, offering the community no comfort that it will be replaced or relocated to the same size or specification. Our recent experience of the downgrading of the existing community centre in the District Centre scheme makes a very worrying precedent.

24. We therefore OBJECT to this policy as being unsound unless the boundary shown on the Policies Map is redrawn to follow the boundary of the District Centre scheme. We will commit to use the BBLNP to determine if and how any other land beyond that boundary may come forward for beneficial redevelopment in the future.

Policy SPS10: Knights Road **Policy SPS10: unsound**

25. We note that this policy is in the process of being implemented through the recent planning consent. We had a number of concerns on the proposal and especially in its lack of proper attention to understanding the biodiversity interest of the land and putting in place effective mitigation measures.

Policy G1: Protection of the Green Infrastructure **Policies Map: unsound**

26. We note that the Policies Map does not identify all the green infrastructure assets within the Parish boundary in relation to this policy. Nor does it identify opportunities to invest in better connecting these assets with other within and around the Parish edges or in local biodiversity net gain projects (per Policy G4) or anticipate how local nature recovery may be supported through new development. The Parish Council will look to address these deficiencies through its BBLNP.

Policies C1 and C2: Town Centre Uses and Maintaining Vibrant Centres **Policy C1: unsound**
Policy C1: unsound

27. The Parish Council is pleased that the District Centre is identified as such in this policy. But, as per the current Policy V1, it identifies a much larger area of Blackbird Leys around Cuddesdon Way than is typical of the other centres identified in the city. Whilst that may not have mattered under the previous Use Class Order, the merging of a wide range of classes into Class E by the 2020 Order may encourage types of development that are only appropriate in the core area, i.e. the retail/commercial units and community centre on Blackbird Leys Road.

28. The community has always regarded that core area as the 'district centre', not the much larger area, and the recently approved application also referred to it as the regeneration of the 'district centre'. The joint provisions of policies C1 and C2 not only allow for a wider range of 'town centre' uses anywhere within the defined area but also for residential development (C2(c)) at 'high density' and 'consolidating uses ... through infill' (C2(b)), with only the provisions of Policy HD8 to act as a design constraint. Even then, that policy allows for 'development at an increased scale and density ... which for residential development ... will be indicatively taken as 100 dph'.

29. The consented scheme at the District Centre has already shown us what that means in terms of the height and density of new buildings with no new car parking provision and of the City Council considering that Blackbird Leys is a 'highly accessible location' to warrant such an approach.

Policies map, Policy C2: unsound

30. We are further concerned that although §7.8 to Policy C2 recognises that 'retaining active frontages in a centre is a key tool in achieving vibrancy (and) securing activity at a ground floor level', the Blackbird Leys district centre is unique in the policy not proposing to define such frontages here. It explains that this is 'because the nature of that centre is as a vital community hub with a wide range of important community functions, many of which are not Use Class E'. But, the consented scheme does include a new commercial ground floor frontage that was argued to improve on the existing parade of shops.

31. We therefore OBJECT to the proposed definition of the District Centre on its current boundary and to the absence of a defined active frontage on the Policies Map.

Policy H2: Delivering Affordable Homes

Policy H2: unsound

32. Blackbird Leys already has a much higher proportion of the city's more affordable, social rented housing stock than any other part of the city. The recently consented District Centre 200 home, high-rise scheme comprises 100% affordable housing, which, whilst contributing to the city's overall stock of affordable homes, will not enable our stock to be better balanced with open market homes.

33. As a result, clauses (a) and (c) of this policy are contradictory in our case. The first requires a minimum of 40% affordable homes (of which 80% should be social rent); the second strives to deliver a 'balanced community'. With the scale of housing development in or on the immediate edge of Blackbird Leys planned for by the Local Plan, the policy has the potential to significantly unbalance our housing stock further.

34. In the BBLNP we will be carrying out a Housing Needs Assessment to investigate our concerns, with a view to informing an affordable housing policy that may increase the provision of First Homes (and to increase their market discount rate) and may impose 40% as a maximum level of affordable homes. In the meantime, we OBJECT to this policy as it cannot be justified in its application to our Parish.

Policy C8: Motor Vehicle Parking Design Standards

Policy C8: unsound

35. The recent District Centre application brought this matter into sharp focus. We consider that it is simply not possible, nor desirable, to deem any future housing development in Blackbird Leys (which will inevitably meet one or more of the policy tests) as 'low car' and thereby require that only pooled car parking spaces are provided.

36. Blackbird Leys is a peripheral housing estate beyond the Oxford Ring Road. Although most parts of the Parish benefit from good public transport access, which may improve on our northern edge with the new East Oxford station, the city centre is relatively remote and the District Centre is small. All our main convenience shops are beyond the periphery of our area and require the use of a car for most trips.

37. Other policies of the Local Plan provide for, and actively promote in some cases, many hundreds of new homes in the Parish and its immediate edges. It is not conceivable, without a clearly thought through parking strategy for Blackbird Leys, that the City Council's ambitions could be achieved here without causing very significant disruption to the local community.

Summary **Summary: no need to add to database**

38. The Parish Council is concerned that the OLP appears to have rushed to making very significant spatial proposals affecting Blackbird Leys that depend on the successful delivery, co-ordination and timing of a variety of development and infrastructure proposals, not just within the city but also with its South Oxfordshire neighbour. Neither the OLP proposals, nor its accompanying Infrastructure Delivery Plan, provide us with sufficient confidence that OCC as the ability to manage this number of moving parts so that the very high level of potential harm to local residents from over-development and inadequate supporting infrastructure can be mitigated.

39. The Parish Council would therefore welcome the opportunity to work with OCC officers in the period up to the examination of the OLP to find ways in which modifications to the OLP, with the support of its own Neighbourhood Plan, may overcome its specific objections and its wider concerns.