

Planning Department
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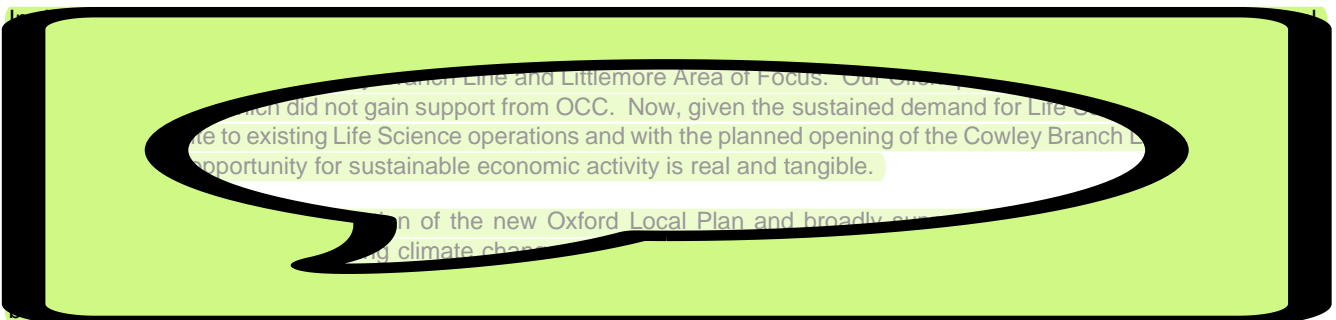
Date: 4 January 2024
Our reference: I1127851

Dear Sir / Madam,

Representations to Regulation 19 Proposed Submission Document Consultation of the Oxford Local Plan Review.

On behalf of Cowley Property Investment Limited (hereinafter 'our Client'), Knight Frank hereby submit representations in respect of the Regulation 19 Consultation on the Oxford Local Plan Proposed Submission Document (dated November 2023), which is running from 10 November 2023 until 5 January 2024.

Our Client has a major land interest in the City as owners of the Oxford Stadium, Sandy Lane, Oxford, OX4 6LJ (hereinafter 'the Site'), which will be substantially affected by the policies and allocations contained within the new Oxford Local Plan. Despite reopening in 2022, the longer-term future of the Stadium remains in doubt given that public interest in greyhound racing has significantly declined and this, combined with continuing objection to the sport from animal rights groups, has led to a significant decline in the number of licenced 'tracks' in the UK down from 250 to the current 21 (source: Greyhound Board of Great Britain). Speedway, whilst also an activity at the Stadium, is seasonal and is not sufficient in itself to support the long-term financial sustainability of the Stadium. Gambling revenues, the majority of which come from 'online' gambling are what sustain the current Stadium operations but there is little gain for the local economy.



We set out our representations in more detail in the following, they specifically relate to the following policies but should also be considered in the context of the wider Plan:

- **Policy CBLLAOF:** Cowley Branch Line and Littlemore Area of Focus
- **Draft Policy S1:** Spatial Strategy and Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development
- **Oxford Stadium Conservation Area**
- **'Policy C3:** Protection, alteration and provision of local community facilities'

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Background Context

Our Client has always perceived this Site as a longer-term development opportunity. Proposals were made in 2016 to secure planning permission for residential development. Those proposals were not supported but part of the site was considered to be suitable for residential development in the current iteration of the Adopted Local Plan.

Policy SP51 of the Adopted Oxford Local Plan 2036 indicates that residential redevelopment of the car park site would be appropriate as enabling development to facilitate the use of the Oxford Stadium. The Policy also allows for wider residential led redevelopment if it is demonstrated that speedway and greyhound racing is not viable. We accept that this policy predated the recommencement of operations of the Stadium in 2022 but it must be borne in mind that the longer-term sustainability of these activities remains a key risk.

Our Client has previously engaged with the Local Plan consultation process at the Regulation 18 'Preferred Options' stage seeking to ensure that their land is given consideration as a site allocation (HELAA #11). Page 214 of the Regulation 18 consultation document identified the Oxford Stadium as being a 'specific development site' for 'minimum housing numbers' within the 'Cowley Branch Line, Littlemore and the Leys Area of Focus'. It also identified the key principles for the Oxford Stadium site as being "mixed use development, leisure and recreation and residential enabling development".

Our Client supported the principle of the identification of the Area of Focus and also the Oxford Stadium as a Specific Development Site in the consultation document. Accordingly, the Council's Preferred Options are also supported in principle. The Preferred Options being:

- A. *Designate area of focus, the designation would cover density issues, protection of wildlife corridors, safeguarding land for Cowley Branch Line proposed stations and access, improved connectivity for the area and between areas*
- B. *Include detailed site development guidance for the sites listed.*

In relation to the detailed site development guidance under B, the previous representation explained that new guidance must reflect the guidance already included in Policy SP51 of the Adopted Oxford Local Plan 2036. In particular, that the site development guidance should include the parts of adopted Local Plan Policy SP51 that relate to enabling residential development not impacting on the operation of the Stadium and also the opportunity for residential led redevelopment in the event that the reinstatement of speedway and greyhound racing is found to be unviable.

The relevant parts of the policy are highlighted below:

*"Planning permission will be granted for revival of the stadium for greyhound racing and/or speedway, with supporting community or leisure uses and **enabling residential dwellings on the car park or other areas that will not affect the operation** or heritage interest of the Oxford Stadium site.*

If it is demonstrated that bringing speedway and greyhound racing back into use is not viable, high quality residential led redevelopment supported by appropriate uses that will benefit the wider community for example complementary leisure or community uses that include reference to the heritage interest of the site will be supported.

Opportunities should be sought to enhance and promote more sustainable travel to and from the site, in line with Policies M1 to M5."

Importantly, the parts of Policy SP51 highlighted above were identified as being necessary by the Inspectors who conducted the Examination in Public of the Oxford Local Plan 2036. This was achieved via Main Modifications 107 and 108, which paragraph 194 of the Inspectors Report (May 2020) confirms were required in order to ensure that the policy is effective and consistent with national policy.

The opportunity for residential led development in the event that speedway and greyhound racing is unviable was introduced by the Local Plan Inspectors, with their explanation of the reasons for this provided at pages 41 and 42 of the Inspectors Report.

We were surprised to note in the latest Draft Plan for consultation that OCC has apparently changed their view on this site significantly. Whilst the Oxford Stadium site continues to be identified within the 'Cowley Branch Line and Littlemore Area of Focus' it is no longer identified as a 'specific development site (i.e. an allocation)' and that the pro-development guidance set out in adopted Local Plan Policy SP51 is not being carried across to the new plan.

Clearly this change in policy context for the Site would significantly restrict future use or redevelopment at this site in the event that greyhound racing and/or speedway were to cease.

The Site

The Site comprises the Oxford Stadium with associated buildings and car park. The Site, which measures approximately 3.4 hectares is roughly triangular in shape and located approximately 3 miles to the southeast of Oxford City Centre.

The Site contains a number of buildings, structures and race tracks that have predominantly been used in association with greyhound and speedway racing. As you are aware, the use of the stadium for greyhound racing and speedway recommenced in 2022 following a circa 10-year hiatus.

The Site forms the Oxford Stadium Conservation Area designated as such in April 2014. There are no statutorily listed buildings on-site; however the Site is recorded on the City Council's Heritage Asset Register as a Local Heritage Asset (comprising the stadium and the surrounding car park). The Conservation Area Appraisal identifies buildings and structures that have a 'high', 'medium', or 'low' contribution to "*the historic and architectural interest of the area*".

The Site is bound by Sandy Lane to the south, the Cowley Branch line to the north-west, and an industrial area comprising a bus garage and other commercial uses to the east. The site lies on the northern edge of the Blackbird Leys Housing Estate.

To the north, on the other side of the railway track is a Tesco and the various retail outlets of Cowley Retail Park. The Oxford Science Park, a Category 1 Employment Site which comprises a number of office and research and development facilities, is located circa 1 mile to the southwest of the Site. ARC Oxford (formerly the Oxford Business Park) is located approximately 500m to the north of the Site.

To the north and east of the Site are extensive areas of commercial and industrial uses, these are designated as Category 1 Employment Sites. Further afield to the east lies Watlington Road (leading to Garsington Road), one of the principle arterial routes into the City with the BMW Mini Plant and Cowley Trading Estate beyond.

Current Operation and Community Value

As you may be aware, the use of the stadium for greyhound racing and speedway recommenced in 2022 following a circa 10-year hiatus. The Operators lease was granted for a contractual term of 10 years from 15th December 2021 with a mutual break on 15th December 2026.

Most of the existing activity relates to the main 'grandstand' with the wider site largely open air and exposed to the elements. Greyhound racing operates 2-3 times per week usually on Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays. Speedway operates generally between March and August with home and away events generally on weekly basis.

The greyhound racing and speedway attract a relatively low footfall and patronage with visitors not specifically rooted in the local community. The majority of the Operator's income is generated from an Online Gambling platform(s) which televises the racing overseas. In this respect, the Stadium location is not specific to a large part of its income. Given the low footfall of local attendees, the car park has been let to a well-known local Life Science company as relief car parking.

There is of course an element of employment, but this is generally relatively lower grade administrative, food & beverage operations and cleaning jobs. The Speedway Teams and dog handlers are not physically based on site other than for race days and travel to competitions in other locations.

More fundamentally dog racing as a 'sport' is in significant decline within the UK. As noted previously, the number of 'tracks' has reduced from 250 down to 21. The sport has come under pressure from Animal Rights Groups and attendance numbers have dwindled significantly. Oxford Stadium itself was closed for 10 years before the current Operator recommenced activities in 2022.

The Gaming and Gambling Industry has also been subject to intense scrutiny in recent years due to concerns about compound problems associated with gambling addiction (e.g. financial, relationship and health problems) and concern that online gambling in particular is difficult to regulate, tax or monitor for health impacts etc.

As a 'community' facility the ongoing relevance and longer-term viability of the Stadium is questionable given the low patronage and we are aware that noise generated from the Speedway and greyhound racing is considered to be a nuisance by some local residents.

Whilst there is space below the grandstand for other business activities, we understand that these have struggled to attract and maintain tenant interest and as such there has not been any sustained wider leisure or business activities that benefit the local community.

We therefore question the inherent community and/or leisure value of this facility and suggest that other facilities could generate much wider public benefits from the Site including the possibility of enhancing access to the new Cowley Branch Line proposed Rail Station.

We note in the context of Draft Policy C3 that 'community uses' are expected to be protected or reprovided. We consider the Stadium distinct from the general thrust and objectives of Policy C3 but would welcome the Council's clarification of this point. The current facility is a commercial enterprise rather than providing a 'community' activity. We accept that it offers 'entertainment' but as referenced elsewhere the interest, particularly in greyhound racing, is very much in decline. We do not consider it feasible to protect the existing uses or reprovide similar uses within the site in the event that the existing greyhound and speedway uses become unviable. On this basis we would see redevelopment facilitating wider alternative community benefits rather than replicating or reproviding existing uses on Site.

Emerging Policy

The inclusion of the Site within the Cowley Branch Line and Littlemore Area of Focus (Policy CBLLAOF) is supported and is a clear sign that the Council sees this as an area for regeneration. The Regulation 19 Plan explains that Areas of Focus will be the focus for new housing development supported by improvements to pedestrian and cycling infrastructure; reduced car parking; enhancements to public transport; good urban design; and enhanced landscape planting. The anticipated re-opening of the Cowley Branch Line to passenger rail services will significantly improve the connectivity and sustainability credentials of the area.

However, we object to the removal of the Site from the specific Site Allocations in the emerging Plan. As currently drafted, the Regulation 19 Plan prevents redevelopment of the Oxford Stadium site or its associated car park. This is short sighted and assumes the longer-term sustainability of the Stadium. As a minimum, we would have expected the Regulation 19 Draft Plan to carry forward the provisions set out in Policy SP51 of the adopted Plan for redevelopment of the car park and for wider redevelopment should greyhound racing become unviable.

As stated previously in this representation, greyhound racing and speedway recommenced in 2022 following a circa 10-year hiatus. These activities remain in their infancy and accordingly their longevity cannot be guaranteed. The majority of revenue generated by the race track is from online gambling linked to overseas television broadcast rights rather than from local trade and live attendance. The limited local trade and live attendance reflects that there is sparse interest in greyhound racing reflective of its declining nature as an entertainment experience partially due to the sports association with ongoing animal rights issues. The facility therefore provides limited ongoing benefit to the local community. In this regard, the viability of the use may be highly susceptible to any future changes to gambling legislation and public opinion.

The Site, which comprises previously developed land, is located at the heart of the Cowley Branch Line and Littlemore Area of Focus immediately adjacent to the proposed location of a new rail station on the Cowley Branch Line. The Site therefore represents a significant opportunity for OCC and could accommodate a range of potential uses to help meet Oxford's needs in a city where the availability of land for new development is constrained.

We therefore request that Policy CBLLAOF includes similar working to Adopted Plan Policy SP51 and propose the following for inclusion in the new Plan.

If it is demonstrated that speedway and/or greyhound racing becomes unviable, high quality redevelopment supported by appropriate uses that will benefit the wider community for example complementary leisure or community uses that include reference to the heritage interest of the site will be supported.

Research and Development Use (Life Sciences)

Oxford is renowned as a world-leading location for research and development in the life sciences and health sectors. The Proposed Submission Document sets out a "vision which supports research and development in the life sciences and health sectors which are and will provide solutions to global challenges."

The focussed background papers and further evidence base studies which support the emerging Local Plan explain that demand for commercial floorspace in Oxford is led by research and development and lab spaces.

The Preferred Options consultation identified that expansion of existing employment sites was the preferred option, and this is the strategy that has been carried through to the Proposed Submission Plan.

Draft Policy S1 'Spatial Strategy and Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development Part d states "*focus new employment development that supports Oxford's national and international role in research and development will be focused on existing sites already in that use, prioritising housing elsewhere*".

However, the Preferred Options consultation acknowledged that this strategy is unlikely to meet local employment needs in full due to competing priorities for land for other purposes. We also note that the above policies are to some extent reliant upon commercial restrictions including leasehold interests.

This Site is ideally located in close proximity to the Oxford Science Park and ARC Oxford; both of these Sites are allocated in the Proposed Submission Document for intensification noting the proposed new rail connections as a significant benefit. Development of the Site for a life sciences facility would benefit from the clustering of such facilities in this area of Oxford and from the proposed new rail links.

Our Client considers that the Site represents an excellent 'self-contained' opportunity for a new purpose-built R&D / life sciences facility to help meet local identified needs and assist Oxford in continuing to support its national and international role in research and development. Proximity to the planned Cowley Branch Line Station would significantly enhance the sustainability of such a facility in this location and would be complimentary to any future redevelopment on adjacent land ownerships.

Furthermore, we have assessed the Site and consider that improved connections to and from the railway line could be facilitated by such development potentially facilitating a north-south link that would help connect existing residential communities.

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The Proposed Submission Plan makes provision for only 481 new homes per annum to be built in Oxford over the plan period (2021-2036 Housing Requirement). Meanwhile the housing need in Oxford is for 1,322 new dwellings per annum. The Proposed Submission Plan therefore makes provision for only 36% of the identified housing needs of the area which results in a significant shortfall. The Proposed Submission Plan acknowledges that "Oxford continues to suffer from a chronic undersupply of homes."

The Proposed Submission Plan identifies a need for new homes in the city, yet the viability of housing development remains increasingly constrained. The Council has a strong track record in delivering housing development and with the Proposed Submission Plan's goal of delivering new housing, we are confident in our ability to deliver a solution. We will continue to work with the Council to ensure that the Proposed Submission Plan is a "chronic undersupply" of homes.

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The Site forms the Oxford Stadium Conservation Area as specified in the Local Plan Proposed Submission Document.

The supporting text to Adopted Local Plan Policy SP51 explains that the historical and cultural significance of the Oxford Stadium and the former [at the time of writing] greyhound and speedway uses led to the Site being designated as a Conservation Area.

On this basis, the heritage interest of the Conservation Area is associated primarily with the greyhound and speedway uses as community and/or leisure activities. Should these uses cease or relocate, then the significance of the heritage asset would reduce and it is unrealistic to expect a future reuse of the existing facilities or one that preserves much of the existing built fabric. There are of course other ways to reflect the history of the site within any future development and we would be willing to work with the Council's Conservation and Heritage Officers in this regard.

Our Recommendations

Redevelopment

As currently drafted, the Proposed Submission Document provides limited opportunity for redevelopment of the Oxford Stadium site. We appreciate that the Council intends to protect the existing uses of the Oxford Stadium but for reasons we

have outlined herewith, the longer-term viability and sustainability of the Stadium activities remain at risk. As such we think it is essential to plan for a scenario where the Stadium becomes redundant again.

We recommend that the Site is allocated for redevelopment to provide new uses to help meet Oxford's needs. As explained above, a life sciences facility is the preferred option; primarily due to the site's characteristics including surrounding uses and future rail links. For such a facility to be deliverable, it would be necessary to redevelop the site in its entirety.

As a minimum, we recommend that the parts of adopted Policy SP51 be included in the new Plan to allow for future flexibility to reuse and redevelop the Site.

We further recommend that the Plan considers a range of alternative future uses for the site to include purpose built R&D/Life Science and Residential development. We would welcome further clarification in the context of Draft Policy C3 regarding 'community uses' in the context of this Site. As stated elsewhere in this representation we do not consider it feasible to replicate or re-provide existing uses should these uses cease to become viable.

Heritage

Whilst we acknowledge that the Site may have a degree of heritage value, we recommended that wording is inserted into the draft Plan which recognises that the heritage interest of the Conservation Area is associated primarily with the greyhound and speedway uses. Should these uses cease, the significance of the heritage asset would reduce and the Council would consider comprehensive redevelopment options that pay tribute to the historic use of the Site.

Conclusion

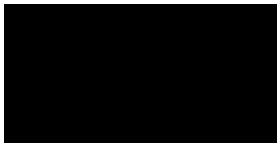
We make the above recommendations pursuant to the Council preparing a robust and technically 'sound' Local Plan. While supporting the strategic objectives of the Draft Plan we consider that the draft policies for the Cowley Branch Line Area of Focus do not reflect the full potential of what could be achieved in this location. There remains uncertainty about the longer-term operation of the Oxford Stadium and longer-term opportunities for the land should be included within the emerging Plan.

We would be grateful for acknowledgement of receipt of this submission and also for updates to be provided on the future stages of the preparation of the Local Plan 2040.

We would welcome dialogue with the planning policy department to discuss the site opportunity.

If you have any questions or require any further information, then please do contact me via [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely



Stuart Baillie

Head of Planning, Knight Frank