

**OXFORD LOCAL PLAN 2040 EXAMINATION
(PART 1)**

HEARING STATEMENT

On behalf of:

Friends of Iffley Village (FOIV)

and

Friends of the Fields Iffley (FOFI)

May 2024

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Hearing Statement has been prepared in response to the Part 1 Matters, Issues and Questions identified by the inspectors presiding over the Oxford Local Plan 2040 Examination. It is intended to assist the inspectors' consideration of the soundness of the Plan (and related matters such as whether it has been positively prepared with due cooperation between the City Council and relevant stakeholders) and it will form the basis of oral submissions at the Examination hearing sessions scheduled for 11-13 June 2024, should further elaboration on the points be required at that time.
- 1.2 The statement has been prepared jointly on behalf of Friends of Iffley Village (FOIV) with the support of Friends of the Fields Iffley (FOFI). FOIV has an express remit of protecting the Iffley Conservation Area (ICA) and the special attributes of Iffley Village: an area treasured by Oxford residents as a 'village within the city'. FOFI has a more targeted and specific remit of opposing the loss to development of the greenfield site within the Iffley Conservation Area known as Iffley Horse Fields (proposed allocation SPS13 'Land at Meadow Lane' in LP2040). Both organisations believe that carrying forward this demonstrably flawed allocation from LP2036 represents a failure on the part of the City Council to prepare the replacement Local Plan positively and in a sound, evidence-based manner. Accordingly, for the LP2040 to be rendered sound, this allocation should be deleted. A joint hearing statement has been prepared in the interests of assisting the examination and avoiding replication. FOIV and FOFI also intend to participate in the Part 1 hearings through a single representative.
- 1.3 FOIV and FOFI recognise that the specific merits and demerits of proposed site allocation SPS13 are not matters the Inspectors wish to receive specific submissions on in Part 1 of the Examination. They intend to make further written and oral submissions to Part 2 to this end. However, both are of the view that the flaws with that proposed allocation are symptomatic of overarching problems which do fall to be considered in Part 1 of the Examination, hence the decision to be involved at this stage.
- 1.4 While FOIV and FOFI have other concerns about the Local Plan, they do not advance a proposition that it is *fatally* flawed. Both believe that the flaws with the draft Local Plan can be remedied in order to make it sufficiently sound for adoption. Such remedies obviously include the deletion of the unsupportable proposed site allocation SPS13 (and cooperation between City and County to deliver its affordable housing component at the near-adjacent SPS14) but they are not limited to that. There are matters at a more strategic level that FOIV and FOFI believe also require attention to improve the Plan and it is these that this Part 1 Hearing Statement is focused on.

1.5 The inspectors are invited to read FOIV and FOI's representations at the Regulation 19 stage of the Local Plan (ref: 167 and 163 respectively in the Reg 19 Respondent index), such that they can appreciate that matters dealt with in this statement have been raised before, and indeed repeatedly. The inspectors are also invited to consider whether the City Council's comments on these and other submissions on SPS13, as set out in their March 2024 consultation statement, are indicative of an open- or closed-minded response to the emergence of major problems with the allocation of that site.

2 Scope and structure of statement

2.1 This statement responds to questions 7, 8, 9 and 17 under Matter 1, questions 7, 10 and 13 under Matter 2, and question 6 under Matter 3 as a focus for responding under that matter (housing need and how it is calculated) generally. Each is dealt with in turn below.

3 **Matter 1 – Sustainability Appraisal (SA)**

3.1 Under the sub-heading ‘Sustainability Appraisal’, **Question 7** of the inspectors’ Matters, Issues and Questions asks:

“7. How and when were options considered for:

- a) The overall scale of housing and other growth*
- b) The distribution of development*
- c) Potential site allocations*
- d) Policy approaches”*

3.2 FOIV and FOFI recognise that the Plan’s (and by extension the Council’s) approach to Oxford’s acknowledged issues with housing supply, and affordable housing in particular, are sources of common concern across multiple stakeholders who have provided responses to the Local Plan at Regulation 19 stage or before. We agree with many of these stakeholders that there are major concerns with how the urgent delivery of residential development, particularly in locationally sustainable city centre brownfield locations, is seemingly treated as a second-class consideration when the Council is presented with such land being promoted for employment development or academic development such as student accommodation. This concern has been articulated amply by others, but we wish to record our support for it here. In short, each time the Council succumbs to pressure by the university/s to favour laboratory/life-science, other hi-tech employment or student/academic development on brownfield sites within the city, in place of residential, they exacerbate the City’s housing crisis. We believe this challengeable hierarchy of priorities is a key driver for the apparent increasing focus on edge-of-city and/or often locationally or environmentally unsustainable sites, and neighbouring districts, for housing. The proposed allocation of SPS13 is an example of sites that have been previously dismissed by the Council as unsuitable for development over multiple former local plan iterations, for reasons that remain sound and even more acute today. That such sites are being now drawn into the process is a consequence of this failure of balance, holistic vision and decision making. We believe it is not an exaggeration to state that the lack of balance in the City Council’s approach to strategic planning, and its apparent impotence in the face of pressure exerted by the university/s growth agendas, is a major and increasing cause of the city’s housing and transport ills, and the threat to its historical and biodiverse legacy. This mounting pressure on less sustainable, or even wholly unsustainable greenfield sites such as SPS13 harms the City’s environment and, by extension, is representative of a growing threat to the city’s wider standing and ability to attract future investment as it becomes incrementally a poorer, harder and less green place to live.

3.3 The Council's Sustainability Appraisal is singularly unsuccessful in recognising or highlighting these flaws in approach to spatial planning. To a large extent we believe this is an issue with SAs generally, and we trust and expect these fundamental issues about SA methodology will be known to the inspectors. In short, they do not adequately capture poor site selection, as the history around SPS13 testifies, but the way that they have been applied in this case has allowed extraordinary decisions to be made and/or railroaded through in the face of clear evidence that they should not be. The proposed allocation SPS13 is a case in point as we intend to expand upon at Part 2 of the Examination.

3.4 **Question 8** of the inspectors' Matters, Issues and Questions under 'Sustainability Appraisal' asks:

"Were all reasonable alternatives considered"

3.5 At strategic level, FOIV and FOFI do not believe that the matter of alternatives has been adequately considered by the Council at key junctures in the Plan making process, including the SA, and that this is again reflective of its failure to adequately balance Oxford's housing needs and the needs of the populace generally with its economic growth agenda and/or the commercial demands of the universities. The SPS13 allocation is, furthermore, symptomatic of something even more concerning - an inflexible and myopic approach. This is illustrated by the fact that the Council has (in the face of clear evidence that the SPS13 site should never have been allocated¹) been encouraged by FOIV, FOFI and others to work with the County Council to ensure absorption of the unsuitable site's proposed affordable housing quota on the nearby and more suitable allocated site owned by the County (SPS14). This would enable the inappropriate SPS13 allocation to be deleted without detriment to crucial affordable housing delivery. However, the City Council has, as far as we are aware, singularly failed to work with the County on this site. No evidence has been provided that there has even been a conversation between the City Council and the County Council on this point, which raises issues salient to the question of the duty to cooperate. It has been intimated that the County are not open to such discussions because it may harm the revenue they expect to get from open market housing on SPS14. But again, no evidence has been provided one way or the other.

3.6 More generally FOIV and FOFI consider that the City Council's unbalanced growth agenda, and the influence this has on its spatial planning decisions, has fettered its openness to consideration of reasonable alternatives, one symptom being the

¹ A suite of technical reports submitted in respect of the live planning application for this site has exposed how cursory and flawed the site allocation process was for LP2036 and how development of this site is not achievable without offending national policy and the adopted policies of LP2036. By proposing to simply 'carry over' this allocation to LP2040, the Council is in effect seeking to double down on the mistakes of the past.

prioritisation of locationally sustainable city centre sites for hi-tech employment or academic development, rather than residential.

3.7 **Question 9** of the inspectors' Matters, Issues and Questions around the Sustainability Appraisal asks:

“Overall, has the methodology for the SA been appropriate?”

3.8 We believe that the methodology for the SA is fundamentally flawed and note that it is little different from (and thus has not learned from) the approaches to SA taken in previous Local Plan iterations in Oxford, which have resulted in demonstrably flawed (and unsustainable) allocations slipping through. For example, the SA pays insufficient or no heed to a suite of highly relevant factors that are integral to the consideration of sustainability and sustainable development within the City, as follows:

- i) On carbon emissions, there is no consideration of the embodied carbon associated with the growth agenda and how this might be mitigated or offset, including no consideration of the relative carbon budget implications of greenfield site allocations against brownfield.
- ii) On climate change resilience, the Plan continues to promote development on areas subject to flood risk (including at proposed allocation SPS13) which is diametrically opposed to the objective of ensuring climate resilience.
- iii) On efficient use of land, the Plan prioritises employment provision in sustainable city centre locations, pushing demand for residential land to locations that are less sustainable on the grounds of location/accessibility, flood risk, high intrinsic biodiversity interest or amenity, recreational and well-being value as part of the city's green infrastructure. All of these factors apply to proposed allocation SPS13.
- iv) On inequalities, both FOIV and FOVI acknowledge Oxford's housing affordability crisis which is why they have sought to encourage the City Council to work with the County on enhanced deliverability of social housing (and/or other truly affordable tenure types) at the Iffley Mead allocation site, but there is no evidence that the City and County have had any such conversation, and indeed signs that such co-operation is being actively resisted.
- v) On services and facilities, leisure and recreation, the LP2040 as proposed seeks to denude the City's green infrastructure provision by building on valued green spaces, damaging conservation areas and compromising valued recreational and non-motorised transport conduits (such as Quiet Routes) through the introduction to them of significant increases in motorised traffic. Proposed allocation SPS13 is again symptomatic of these unresolved and unbalanced internal conflicts within the Plan.

- vi) On traffic and air pollution, SPS13 is an example of spatial planning proposals that will deliver residential development in unsustainable locations that are remote from public transport provision and local services by reference to established criteria, thereby increasing reliance upon car-borne transport and in the case of SPS13 at the same time damaging and compromising the adjacent designated Quiet Route (OXR18) which provides an important non-motorised transport route into the City and is of high recreational and amenity value.
- vii) On water, the Environment Agency has recently intimated that local sewage treatment infrastructure is unable to cope with the proposed housing delivery under LP2040, and indeed has hinted that there should be a moratorium on further residential development without upgrades to STW infrastructure. The consequences of this for the River Thames, and for the ecosystem services it brings to the City, are well known, and dire. This issue is not addressed in the SA.
- viii) On biodiversity, the proposed development of the SPS13 site allocation flies in the face of evidence that has emerged as a consequence of the City Council's planning application to develop that site under the existing LP2036 allocation and which shows *inter alia* that a) the process of allocation under LP2036 was fatally flawed and not evidence-based; b) the site easily qualifies for formal Wildlife Site status; c) the site is of county importance for invertebrates and of high local value for other taxa and d) the site cannot be developed without a net loss of biodiversity which the Council has been unable to evidence as being capable of being compensated or off-set within the City limits – thus resulting in net denudation of the City's biodiversity².
- ix) On design and heritage, SPS13 uncritically carries across the policy flaws from LP2036 which enshrine an irreconcilable internal conflict – namely that a minimum number of units is required while at the same time harm to the Iffley Conservation Area must be avoided. However, such harm is (now) accepted by the City Council and independent expert analysis has shown that the site cannot be developed without such harm to the ICA being 'substantive'.
- x) On economic growth, the SA fails to give appropriate weight to the value of the City's green infrastructure network in enhancing the historic setting and collectively making Oxford an attractive place to invest and work in. There is no consideration of the ecosystem services implications of the Plan, in particular where it seeks to allocate development on highly valued greenspace within the City limits, and where allocations harm recreational and non-motorised transport routes.

² Even considering the scope for offset outside the City limits, it is salient to note that the City Council's favoured BNG offset supplier: Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE) has confirmed that it will not facilitate the loss of high value sites such as SPS13, especially where (as here) there are extant objections from statutory (e.g. EA) and non-statutory (e.g. BBOWT) consultees.

7 Conclusions

- 7.1 Whilst FOIV and FOFI will reserve the main thrust of their submissions for Part 2 of the Examination, in anticipation of the merits or demerits of individual site allocations being examined at that stage, they hope that the inspectors will understand such concerns stem from systemic flaws in the process that are relevant to Part 1. We intend to have a representative at the hearings on June 11-13 and that individual will be available to further articulate and/or elaborate on the points made in this statement, as required. Overall, FOIV's and FOFI's joint position is that the LP2040 requires modification, including the deletion of allocation SPS13, in order for it to be rendered sound, positively prepared and for it to be considered a product of due cooperation with stakeholders, including (not least) the populace of this great city.