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SENT BY email

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**OBJECTION TO PLANNING APPLICATION  
REF 11/00114/F AND 11/00115/CAC: WINCOTE, COW LANE, STEEPLE ASTON**

Dear Sir,

As local residents, we wish to formally object to the proposal for the following reasons:

1. It adversely affects the setting of a Grade II\* Listed building- namely the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, the single most important building in Steeple Aston, and
2. It is inappropriate development within a Conservation area.
3. It contravenes the Council's own policies.

To elaborate:

**1. The Listed Building**

1.1 Norman parish churches in England are a defining part of the landscape: in mid- and long-distance views of English countryside it is most often the church tower or steeple appearing above the trees that locates a village or settlement. From the east side of the Cherwell valley it is possible to see three such churches in a single view- those of Steeple Aston, Lower Heyford and Upper Heyford.

1.2 These churches were given their high listed status not only because of their intrinsic historic and architectural interest, but also because of their important role in creating and maintaining the character of these villages. In planning law there is particular emphasis on "the setting of a listed building" to emphasise this aspect of the contribution that such a building makes to its surroundings.

1.3 The view of the village from the Cherwell Valley is therefore a critical one in maintaining this historic contribution to the landscape, and any development that might detract from that must be carefully considered.

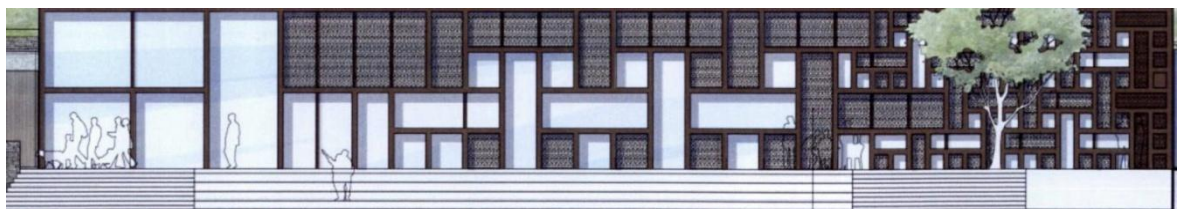
1.4 The applicants have deliberately played down the impact of the proposal on the church in their presentation. It is missing from the key East elevation drawing, where it ought to appear in the background, looming up behind the house. It is missing from all the development plan sketches and drawings, which conveniently use Fir Lane as their cut-off.

The only attempt to face up to this important issue is illustrated on p.35 of the Planning, Design and Access Statement, where View 03 appears to show that only a small portion of the East elevation would be visible, peeping through the trees below the church tower.

1.5 This montage is, in our view, misleading. The view is of summer trees, in full foliage. In winter it is very likely that a much greater extent of the elevation will be visible. This might not be an issue if the elevation in question were not so extraordinary. Presumably because of the applicants wish to keep the building low, it has become very long instead. It is twice the length of, for example, the main elevation of Aston House nearby across Cow Lane. In addition, and of crucial importance, the applicants have chosen to orientate the building East-West rather than North-South (as is Aston House, and indeed the Longbyre next door to the site- both new buildings given approval in recent years). The existing building of Wincote is not visible through the trees, even in winter, and this is because it is South-facing. The decision to place the double-length elevation facing East maximises its views out across the Cherwell Valley. But by the same token, that decision exposes the façade to view from the Valley.

1.6 It is difficult to be certain of how the development might appear in Winter, but on a bright sunny morning, with the sun low in the sky, it is quite likely that the façade will be lit up quite strongly, despite the use of dark-coloured materials, and that the very large areas of glazing behind the façade will reflect sunlight, and catch the eye, as seen from Cow Lane. A possible view is shown in our montage [attachment 1], which does not adequately represent winter trees without foliage, and so an attempt to compensate for this is made by superimposing the applicant's own image of the East elevation on to a colour-altered version of their own photograph. It is also worth noting that our montage does not include the very visible flanking walls to either side of the elevation, so the impact may well be even greater than that shown.

1.7 It is interesting to compare the applicant's drawing of the East elevation, below, to their rendition of it peeping through the trees in View 03. It might be thought that its appearance there, in deep shadow, is deliberately muted, whereas with full sun on it in the mornings the façade might be nearer in appearance to the Elevation drawing itself, as indicated in our montage. It is difficult to be sure, but there must be sufficient doubt about this to render it a major concern. It is a concern because it will be seen, from Cow Lane, and from further across the Valley, directly below the Church tower, as the applicants' own montage makes clear.



1.8 It is also worth noting, in passing, that the applicants pay great attention to the Rousham "Eye Catcher". This was designed by William Kent as a folly, deliberately standing out on the hill-side. The orientation of the proposed development ensures that the Eye Catcher will be seen from its windows. View 01 on p.31 of the Statement document makes this clear. If the photo had been taken from the other side of the Eye Catcher, instead of being obscured by it the development would be clearly visible. One Eye Catcher looking across to another, both of them follies.

1.9 A rambler visiting the Eye Catcher would see through his binoculars a juxtaposition of the development and the church tower similar to that shown below.



1.10 The first objection is therefore that this unusually long, inappropriately-designed façade will adversely affect the setting of the Church as seen from this view, because it is of inappropriate scale and design in relation to the mediaeval church tower. This view of the listed building needs to be protected by Cherwell District Council because of its important value to the village and its iconic status in the landscape.

## 2. Conservation Area

2.1 The second part of the objection is that the development is inappropriate in a Conservation Area. The argument here is very straightforward. Conservation Areas exist to define and protect the character of settlements. It is acknowledged that this should not mean that no development takes place, in them, nor that there should be no buildings of modern design. There are some wonderful examples of carefully designed and thoughtful modern buildings in cathedral closes. This is not such an example.

2.2 It is not co-incidental that planners included Wincote in Steeple Aston's Conservation Area. The line could well have been drawn to exclude it, as has happened elsewhere in the village (eg. The White House- which was built before the 1948 Town and Country Planning Act, and so planning permission was not an issue; but if it were the subject of an application today, it would probably be refused.)

2.3 Wincote's site is part of the historical core of the village, as the applicants acknowledge. There must, in our view, be a difference in the way that planners react to proposals which are on one side or the other of a Conservation Area boundary. If they are within, as this is, much more careful consideration must be given to the impact of the proposal on the character of the village. The same proposal outside the boundary might be approved, while this is refused. That is the only way to make sense of having Conservation Areas at all. In our view, this development is of inappropriate scale, character and design for its location in the Conservation Area.

2.4 The footprint of the development, which replaces a single family home purportedly with another (about which there has to be some doubt- why are there 12 parking spaces?)

appears to be about six times as great in area as the footprint of the existing house with its extensions. The proposal site plan (p. 20 of the document) is misleading in several ways- the bedroom wing, entrance hall and glazed corridor are shown in such a way as to appear as if they are not buildings. If the whole area of the actual building were shaded in the same tone as the living wing it would be clear how enormous the development actually is on plan. Planning officers will obviously be aware of this, and will have the actual “before” and “after” figures, although local people may be taken in by the presentation. The proposal is over-development on a very significant scale. It would be so if it were seven houses. For one house it is nothing short of absurd.

2.5 The “grain” of the village can handle change, but it cannot justifiably accommodate major new development of this scale within the Conservation Area. It would rival the nearby 1960s school in its impact on the plan of the village, and must therefore be very carefully considered. Future generations looking down from Google Earth or at a future Ordnance Survey plan would rightly wonder how planners allowed such a thing to happen to a small English village.

### **3. Council policies**

3.1 The Council’s Core Strategy Document (which represents current thinking likely to be adopted formally as policy in November 2011) includes the following statements (**boldened** here for emphasis):

#### *Policy SD 11*

##### *Local Landscape Protection and Enhancement*

*Opportunities will be sought to secure the enhancement of the character and appearance of the landscape, particularly in urban fringe locations, through the restoration, management or enhancement of existing landscapes, features or habitats and where appropriate the creation of new ones, including the planting of woodlands, trees and hedgerows. Development will be expected to respect and enhance local landscape character, securing appropriate mitigation where damage to local landscape character cannot be avoided.*

##### ***Proposals will not be permitted if they would:***

*Cause undue visual intrusion into the open countryside*

*Cause undue harm to important natural landscape features and topography*

***Be inconsistent with local character***

***Harm the setting of settlements, buildings, structures or other landmark features, or***

***Harm the historic value of the landscape***

#### *Policy SD 13*

##### *The Built Environment*

*New development will be expected to complement and enhance the character of its context through sensitive siting, layout and high quality design. Where development is in the vicinity of any of the district’s distinctive natural or historic assets, delivering high quality design will be essential.*

*New development should:*

*Respect local topography and landscape features, including skylines, valley floors, significant trees, historic boundaries, landmarks, features or views, in particular within designated landscapes, within the Cherwell Valley and within conservation areas and their setting.*

***Preserve and enhance designated historic assets, features, areas and their settings, and ensure new development is sensitively sited and integrated***

*Respect the traditional pattern of routes, spaces, blocks, plots, enclosures and the form, scale and massing of buildings*

***Reflect or, in a contemporary design response, re-interpret local distinctiveness, including elements of construction, elevational detailing, windows and doors, building and surfacing materials and colour palette***

*A.117 Our rural areas will need to accommodate new development **which reinforces the locally distinctive character, by being sensitive in its location, scale and design, reflecting the traditional pattern of development within the settlement**, balancing making best use of land with respect for the established character and respecting open features that make a positive contribution. Council publications, such as its Countryside Design Summary, which analyses settlement types, and Appraisals of its conservation areas, which analyse the special qualities and identify those features that make a positive contribution to the character of the place, will assist in understanding a settlement. National guidance includes Natural England’s guidance on undertaking Village Design Statements.*

3.2 In our opinion these policy guidelines are very clear in their intent. It is very difficult to understand how the applicants’ proposal to 1. demolish a heritage asset and 2. replace it with a building over six times as large designed in a style that essentially has nothing to do with the history of the village, could possibly pass the test of these policies. How does the applicants’ proposal “reinforce our locally distinctive character”, or “reflect the traditional pattern of development within the settlement”? Wincote is important as a heritage asset because it perfectly exemplifies the history of Steeple Aston as an “apple village”, once covered in orchards and populated by people who worked in them. Wincote may be the last remaining cottage together with the remains of its orchard in the village. The 1881 Ordnance Survey plan shows the extent of orchards in the village, and Wincote’s role in that:



3.3 The proposal most certainly does not reinforce locally distinctive character, and neither does it reflect the traditional pattern of development within the settlement. A contemporary design response it may well be, but it does not “re-interpret local distinctiveness” other than by leaving standing a few elements of the demolished house (and even these not visible from outside the site). That is taking the idea of “re-interpreting” just a little too far. It is in fact an insult to the heritage of the village. The rest of the design is uncompromising in its wish to be different to the local vernacular- for example, all the windows on every elevation owe nothing to local detailing.

3.4 Both the proposed demolition and the replacement building are at odds with the Council’s own policy statements, which should be properly enforced in the spirit of Cherwell District Council’s obvious concerns to retain the distinctive character of the district.

**In summary**, for the three key reasons given in this objection, we consider that the applications should be refused.

**Martin Lipson,**  
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**Caroline Langridge**

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*We are incidentally, concerned to hear that Cherwell’s Conservation Officer (who happens to live in the village) has apparently been excluded from preparing the Council’s response to this application. If true, this cannot be right given that the site is in the Conservation Area. We believe that this would be a material fact if the handling of the case were to be subject to judicial review. We would be pleased to be told that we have been misinformed, or that another official with the same specialism and experience has been substituted.*