

Planning Application - 24/00539/F: Objection

I strongly object to this planning application on the basis that it does not meet the "very special circumstances" required for building on the green belt. In this area, we are already losing a lot of green belt land to development and as there is already a football stadium in the county, it seems unnecessary to lose yet more green belt, especially a greenfield site such as this. OUFC's rich owners are using the financial instability of the club to attempt to secure a piece of Oxford real estate to develop commercially for a profit. Some of their plan has already been thwarted by Oxfordshire County Council's (OCC) decisions to (a) offer an alternative site (b) offer leasehold not freehold.

The main thrust of OUFC's argument for "very special circumstances" is that they say the club will cease to exist if this proposal is not approved. I am aware of the issues that OUFC have had with regards to the Kassam Stadium and the lack of financial stability leading from that. The proposed application may be a possible solution but I think it is short sighted to consider it the only solution. OUFC state they do not have a Plan B which shows very poor management.

For the last 2 years, OUFC representatives have repeatedly told the community that they will be "homeless" in June 2026. Those who are not welcoming the stadium with open arms have questioned this but have been waved off with vague answers and no evidence. When pressed, they released some additional information regarding the licence changes, however, this raised yet more questions. In the light of no evidence to the contrary it appears the OUFC engineered their "due to be homeless" situation as follows:

- They engaged in talks with OCC early in 2021 to see if Stratfield Brake could be a viable site.
- They made use of the pandemic situation to arrange a termination of their existing licence, one which gave the right to renew for another 20 years, by using Covid as a reason.
- The stadium company, Firoka, probably did not fight the termination because (a) OUFC are unreliable tenants because they have not always been able to pay their rent on time (b) they will be able to sell the site for housing.
- OUFC ensured that the new licence agreement was short and had no right of renewal.

I do not consider that it is fair for OUFC to be allowed to build on the green belt after engineering this situation. I've already seen them build a "once-in-a-lifetime stadium" in my life!

OUFC seem to have put little effort into alternative solutions such as engaging in mediated talks with Oxford City Council, Oxford County Council and Firoka. It is not essential for a club to own their stadium in order to survive. Firoz Kassam from Firoka told the Oxford Mail in January 2024 that he was open to the club staying at the stadium.

Part of the justification for the "very special circumstances" is benefit to the community. I do not consider that the benefits put forward are needed by the community. As a local resident, I do not feel they have truly got to know the whole community and their needs, instead second-guessing what might be wanted. This is backed up by the report into community benefits that shows the majority of benefits are "minor" and none are "high". The football and rugby clubs believe they stand to gain from improved pitches; however, they could source funding for that from elsewhere such as National Lottery funding. I am concerned that the more deprived community that the club would leave behind stands to lose more than Kidlington and the surrounding areas would gain.

OUFC claim to be counteracting the loss of green belt through a proposed increase in biodiversity and use of eco-friendly building construction. The most eco-friendly situation would be no building and leaving the natural biodiversity of the site alone. As The Triangle site is inaccessible to the general public and not easily visible, it is hard for residents to form opinions as to its level of biodiversity. It was once contaminated and has continued to be considered that way by local residents, including myself. Through the ecology surveys commissioned by Friends of Stratfield Brake, however, I have learnt that it is currently a very biodiverse greenfield site which has been helped by lack of public access. Any existing biodiversity that has built up over the years would be destroyed by the construction work and it seems impossible that increased biodiversity could be achieved in a short time with a site that has been built upon.

Another reason cited by OUFC for having to move is so that their women's team can play at the same stadium as the men. There is no need to build a new stadium for this to occur – better negotiations on the use of the existing stadium could have solved this issue years ago.

As someone who has previously supported OUFC at matches, I am very disappointed in the manner in which they have put forward this proposal. It has caused divisions in the community particularly because of the claim that the club will cease to exist if the project cannot go ahead which has alarmed the committed fans. I am also disappointed that Oxfordshire County Council have let the proposal get this far by not engaging in proper due diligence and ignoring the clear local opposition.

OUFC, their owners and many of their fans may WANT a new stadium but there is little evidence to show that they NEED a new stadium. As such this planning application is not justified.

I urge the planning committee to:

- Note that this land was purchased to maintain a green gap between Oxford and Kidlington, and that much of the green belt that surrounds it is already earmarked for development, making its role even more important.
- Seriously consider if the "very special circumstances" for building on the green belt have truly been met.
- Note that the fact that OUFC's current licence expires in June 2026 does not preclude the possibility of negotiating another licence.

- Carry out full independent due diligence on OUFC's claims that they are unable to stay at the Kassam Stadium, including contacting Firoka directly and examining why the previously held right to renew was lost.
- Rigorously examine the alternative sites report, ensuring all sites are treated equally, including The Triangle and the Kassam Stadium site. Press for information on how up to date this document is, and ensure it is up to date right up to the date of the planning decision.
- With regards to the above, ensure that the Kassam Stadium site is reconsidered in light of the comments made by Firoz Kassam about being open to the club staying and the proposed re-opening of the Cowley Branch Line to passengers.
- Carefully scrutinise the claimed environmental benefits, particularly the biodiversity claims and how they will be enforced.
- Give greater weight to comments from local residents, whose day-to-day lives would be affected by these proposals, than those who live further away and are supporting the application because they believe their football club may otherwise fold.
- Note that the majority of those in favour are OUFC fans who have been led to believe that their club will cease to exist if this is not approved.
- Remember that the Kidlington Parish Poll in May 2023 showed a clear rejection of the proposal and that other local consultations show the majority of those living locally are against the proposal.
- Note that the land at the Kassam Stadium is protected for use as a football stadium in the draft Oxford Local Plan to 2040 unless another is built.
- Consider that approving this application could result in an unusable half-built stadium as the funding for it is currently unclear.
- Consider this proposal in isolation to OUFC's apparent lack of Plan B. That is a risk they have chosen to take and should not be a factor in your decision.
- Consider this in isolation to OUFC's supposed deadline for having to leave the Kassam Stadium in June 2026. Their emergency is not your emergency.

Submitted by

Heidi Lancaster
29 Chorefields, Kidlington, OX5 1SX