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Cherwell District Council
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Our ref: UNO001/cwb/hpf

Dear Mr Feehily

**LAND TO THE EAST OF WOODSTOCK ROAD (A44), BEGBROKE SCIENCE PARK:
Request for a Screening Opinion under the *Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 (as amended)* for an outline application (all matters reserved except access) for employment and commercial development comprising up to approximately 12,500sqm of floorspace (B1a/b/c) and ancillary D1 uses with related development**

We write on behalf of the University of Oxford, who operate and control land at Begbroke Science Park, located to the east of Woodstock Road (A44), Begbroke. In accordance with the *Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (EIA) Regulations 2017* ('EIA Regulations'), we write formally to request that the Council provides a Screening Opinion on the proposed development as described in this letter.

Regulation 6 (2) of the EIA Regulations states:

...a request for a screening opinion...must provide the following:

- a) *A plan sufficient to identify the land;*
- b) *a description of the development, including in particular—*
 - (i) *a description of the physical characteristics of the development and, where relevant, of demolition works;*
 - (ii) *a description of the location of the development, with particular regard to the environmental sensitivity of geographical areas likely to be affected;*
- c) *A description of the aspects of the environment likely to be significantly affected by the development;*
- d) *To the extent the information is available, a description of any likely significant effects of the proposed development on the environment resulting from –*
 - i. *The expected residues and emissions and the production of waste, where relevant; and*
 - ii. *The use of natural resources, in particular, soil, land, water and biodiversity; and*
- e) *Such other information or representations as the person making the request may wish to provide or make, including any features of the proposed development or any measures envisaged to avoid or prevent what might otherwise have been significant effects on the environment.*



A Location Plan (DLA Drawing No. UNO001-001) accompanies this request for a Screening Opinion and is considered sufficient to identify the land the subject of the proposed development. The Location Plan also identifies the maximum possible extent of the proposed development.

This Screening Request letter provides a brief description of the nature and purpose of the development and of its possible effects on the environment, including a description and characteristics of any likely significant effects as required by the EIA Regulations and advice contained in the *Planning Practice Guidance* on EIA development.

The Site and its Planning Context

Begbroke Science Park ('BSP' or 'the site') is owned by the University of Oxford and is situated to the east of Woodstock Road (A44), between the settlements of Begbroke, Yarnton and Kidlington, approximately 3 miles north of the city of Oxford. It extends to approximately 5.54ha in total and is shown on the Location Plan (Drawing No. UNO001-001).

BSP is an established and renowned hub of high-technology research facilities that support the University of Oxford and its affiliates. It is largely built out and occupied and has been the subject of a number of recent planning permissions, as detailed further below. The most recent of these is an outline planning permission (Application No. 15/00309/OUT) for new research buildings that was granted by Cherwell District Council ('the Council') on 20 May 2015. Development has been implemented under this and other associated permissions. However, the 2015 outline permission (15/00309/OUT) contained a condition that required reserved matters applications to be submitted by no later than 1 May 2017. Due to the passage of time, this permission has now become time-expired. This is notwithstanding parts of the site still being available and in demand for research and other development.

The site of the Begbroke Science Park has been occupied since the Iron Age; an Anglo-Saxon settlement is mentioned in the Domesday Book and remains from the site are on view in the Ashmolean Museum. Through the centuries the site was used for farming. The 17th century Jacobean farmhouse has been sensitively restored, and now houses offices and conference facilities for the Science Park. Research at Begbroke dates from 1960 when Begbroke Hill Farm became the HQ of the Weed Research Organisation. In the 1980s, the Cookson Group bought the site for its Technology Centre and in 1998 it was acquired by the University of Oxford.

BSP is a vital research centre for the University as a technological application and research hub and campus. It is universally recognised as a facility of international significance and of great importance to the local, regional and national economies. The Science Park is at the core of the county's innovation ecosystem, which falls within Oxfordshire's 'knowledge spine' and the nationally-important Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford Corridor, the subject of recent scrutiny by the National Infrastructure Commission and Growth Deal funding by HM Treasury.

In 2015, vehicular access to the site was formalised via a direct signal-controlled junction onto the dual-carriageway at Woodstock Road and the A44. Pedestrian and cycle access to the site is still available via Sandy Lane. The site has its own mini-bus service, is on a public transport route (A44 premium route) with easy access to Oxford Airport, the new Oxford Parkway station and Oxford Park-and-Ride services.

The site to which this Screening Request relates is the same red-lined site that benefited from outline permission under Application No. 15/00309/OUT in May 2015. The proposed development simply seeks to effectively "renew" the time-expired 2015 permission. In doing so the proposed development relates primarily to the parts of the site and floorspace quantum not yet implemented from the previous outline permission. This will enable further research



and development and associated facilities to be accommodated at the site to meet current demand. This would help address a chronic space shortage which is inhibiting the further growth and extent of academic and technical research, which has been shown to be of national and international importance.

Recent Planning History

The Science Park, in recognition of its success, has been subject to incremental growth of facilities since it opened.

Most recently, the site has been the subject of an outline permission (15/00309/OUT) that secured in-principle approval for up to 21,236m² of additional floorspace to facilitate the long term aim of developing the existing Science Park further and maximise its potential.

It is conservatively estimated that a maximum of approximately 11,336m² of floorspace has been implemented at BSP, which includes one proposal developed following a separate full permission (circa 357m²). Therefore, there is residual floorspace at the site that is unimplemented. There is also an ongoing requirement for additional buildings to be provided to meet demand.

Both the most recent outline application, and the subsequent reserved matters application were subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment Screening Opinion, obtained from Cherwell District Council (CDC). On both occasions, it was concluded that an Environmental Impact Assessment was not required. We respectfully suggest that the Council reaches the same conclusion on the current Screening Request.

Development Plan and Policy Context

The site was allocated as a 'Major Developed Site' (MDS) in the Non-Statutory Cherwell Local Plan 2011. However, this Local Plan was not adopted and has now been superseded by the adopted Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1. It was established through the adopted Cherwell Local Plan Part 1 that 'exceptional circumstances' exist to justify a small-scale local review of the Green Belt to meet employment and expansion needs at Begbroke Science Park. This is being progressed by the Council through the Cherwell Local Plan Part 2. In addition, BSP has been identified in the emerging Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1 Partial Review - Oxford's Unmet Housing Need as part of a new urban neighbourhood at Begbroke, which helps meet Oxford City's unmet housing need and becomes the connecting centrepiece of the Plan's vision for the area.

Brief Description of Development

The University of Oxford is seeking to renew the time-expired outline permission for the development of the site, previously described as the 'long term phase of site development' at BSP, which followed an 'interim phase'. The submission of reserved matters in respect of the two permissions, however, often overlapped. Nevertheless, the proposed development is intended to be in substantial accordance with the principles established through the 2015 outline permission (15/00309/OUT).

As such the prospective development is therefore intended to comprise:

- Retention of existing buildings on site;
- Up to 12,500m² of B1a / b / c floorspace and ancillary D1 floorspace. This is largely the 'unimplemented' residual floorspace which previously benefited from outline permission and is to be 'renewed' under the new application. However, a minor



increase in floorspace by approximately 2,500m² is proposed, which is required to meet current urgent needs for employment space at BSP.

- Retention of and improvements to the existing vehicular, public transport, pedestrian and cycle access including internal circulation;
- Re-disposition of car parking within the site;
- Associated hard and soft landscape works;
- Any necessary demolition;
- Associated drainage, infrastructure and ground re-modelling works.

The majority of the proposed floorspace to be developed would be for B1(b) & B1 (c) purposes and would accord with the previous planning restriction for no more than 20% of the floorspace to be used for B1(a) office purposes. The overall type of floorspace to be delivered would be to support the main research and development activities of the BSP along with related uses such as the production of prototypes; this would be defined at the reserved matters stage.

The building heights will also be informed by and in substantial conformity with the existing buildings on site (and thus the previous permission). As such building heights of the proposed development are expected to be up to 12.6m (excluding point features and plant). This reflects a minor 100-200mm increase above maximum existing heights of buildings on site and is required to accord with current employment development standards in terms of floor heights. It is also more precise in terms of heights than the previous reference to storeys.

The site area subject to the proposed development covers the existing BSP and is consistent with the previous red line application boundary, identified within the previous planning permission and extending to some 5.54ha. However, only a limited area (the residual unimplemented area) will be subject to new development equating to approximately 1.21ha. The layout, design, appearance and siting of future proposed buildings to be constructed as part of this development is to be reserved for consideration at the detailed stage.

Access

The proposed development would utilise the existing access to the BSP from the signal-controlled junction onto the A44, which is also designed to accommodate public transport with a turning area and lay-by off the access road. The internal access and circulation routes will be largely unaffected by the proposed development although some minor improvement works may be required. Public footpaths are unaffected by the proposal.

Landscape

The proposed development will be contained within the existing, established Science Park site (and previously-approved red-line area) and will remain within an existing substantial hedgerow boundary. Minor landscape works may be undertaken as part of the proposed development, however further details will be provided at the reserved matters stage.

Pre-application discussions have been held with senior Officers at Cherwell District Council in late 2017 and early 2018, to discuss the principle, employment and economic benefits, scale and content of a future application. This Screening Request has therefore been submitted following those discussions and the advice received from Officers.



Principal Considerations

This Screening Request has been submitted to seek a formal Screening Opinion from the Council to ascertain whether an Environmental Impact Assessment is required.

By virtue of the scale and scope of the proposed development, it is not considered that the proposed development falls comfortably within any of the types of development identified within either Schedule 1 or 2 of the EIA Regulations. However, if a categorisation has to be made it is considered that the proposed development would either constitute:

- an *urban development project (Schedule 2, Part 10 (b))*, by virtue of the proposed development including more than 1 hectare of urban development which is not dwellinghouse development; or
- an *industrial estate project (Schedule 2, Part 10 (a))*, by virtue of the area of the proposed development exceeding 0.5 hectares.

This is because the proposed development seeks the provision of flexible research and development buildings (and ancillary D1) and associated works including provision of additional car parking and landscaping within an existing Science Park.

In accordance with Schedule 3 of the EIA Regulations (2017) the principal considerations surrounding the effect of the proposed development upon the environment are explored further below. However, it is considered that the impact of the proposed development is unlikely to cause significant environmental effects (including consideration of cumulative impacts), so as to trigger the requirement or need for the application to include an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

The location of the prospective development and its characteristics

The previous planning applications have considered the environmental characteristics of the site and more recently the site has been assessed through the formulation of the evidence base supporting the Non-Statutory Cherwell Local Plan 2011, the adopted Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1, the emerging Local Plan Partial Review and Local Plan Part 2. This Development Plan and policy context have informed the findings of this Screening Request.

The site is already largely developed for employment uses under planning permissions that have assessed the impact of development upon the environment in this location and its Oxford Green Belt surroundings. Built development at BSP is an established principle. The site is visually contained by a substantial boundary hedgerow and set well-back from the A44, separate from other built development and the settlements of Begbroke and Yarnton. This hedgerow has the potential to support various habitats and species and the site also contains a pond, which could support Great Crested Newt and the existing buildings could support bats. The Ecological / Biodiversity Statement to be submitted with the application will fully assess and consider any impacts on any protected habitats and species and set out any necessary mitigation measures.

The site does contain a Grade II listed building - Begbroke Hill Farmhouse. This is already incorporated sensitively into the BSP development, however, the impact of any future development upon the listed building and its setting will be considered as part of the submitted application within a Heritage Impact Assessment.

As noted above, the site itself is already an established employment area and is not within a 'Sensitive Area', as defined by the EIA Regulations, that is not subject to restrictive ecological, landscape, or other designations at international, national or local levels and does not contain a World Heritage Site or Scheduled Monument.



The site of the proposed development is shown in the adopted Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1 as being located entirely within land earmarked for employment development by virtue of *Policy Kidlington 1B: Accommodating High Value Employment Needs – Begbroke Science Park* and lies within the Green Belt. The adopted Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1 identifies that high value employment needs will necessitate growth at Begbroke Science Park, and as such a Green Belt Review will be undertaken as part of Local Plan Part 2.

This position is further enhanced by Policy PR8 included within the Cherwell Local Plan Partial Review – *Oxford's Unmet Housing Need*, which includes as part of a wider development, 14.7ha of expansion land to support future growth of the Science Park (NB - this is not the subject of this proposed development). Various technical assessments have been undertaken by and on behalf of the Council as part of the evidence base for the emerging Local Plan, which have included a Green Belt Study (April 2017) and a comprehensive Sustainability Appraisal. These have reinforced the conclusion that this site is suitable for employment-related development, and in particular that 'exceptional circumstances' exist to justify a minor review of the Green Belt to allow employment-related development at the site and meet the expansion needs of BSP.

Within the site's wider setting comprises predominantly agricultural land with limited variation in topography. Existing substantial hedgerows provide further enclosure within this wider setting. In terms of 'Sensitive Areas' a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located to the north east of the site - Rushy Meadows. Whilst in relatively close proximity to the site, this will be assessed and considered as part of the Ecological/Biodiversity Statement which is intended to form part of the application. However, Rushy Meadows has also been considered as part of the emerging Local Plan evidence base.

The Council's evidence base has concluded, at this stage, that although a potential hydrogeological connection via superficial sands and gravels is assumed to be present between Rushy Meadows SSSI and the wider proposed PR8 development land to the south, significant hydrological and hydrogeological linkages have not been identified. As a consequence, adverse impacts to Rushy Meadows SSSI from the proposed development are considered negligible.

As noted above the characteristics of the proposed development will be in substantial accordance with the previous outline permission which has already been subject to technical assessment and by virtue of the issued and implemented permissions, been considered to be acceptable in planning, transport, ecological, heritage and other terms.

Characteristics of Impact

The site, save for its current Green Belt designation and presence of the Grade II Listed Begbroke Hill Farmhouse in the southern part of the site, is not covered by any statutory designations. The only statutory designation within 1km of the site is the Rushy Meadows SSSI, which lies to the north east, which has been addressed above.

The application is intended to be accompanied by a suite of supporting documentation, in relation to:

- Drainage and Flood Risk Assessment
- Ground Conditions Assessment
- Transport Assessment (and Travel Plan)
- Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment (including impact upon the Green Belt)
- Ecological / Biodiversity Assessment



- Heritage Impact Assessment

By virtue of the fact that detailed assessments were also undertaken to support the most recent applications including 15/00309/OUT and that planning permission was subsequently granted, it can be considered that no significant environmental effects are associated with employment development at this site that would warrant an EIA. None of those applications identified likely significant environmental effects nor required an Environmental Impact Assessment.

In terms of the “Indicative Screening Thresholds” (Paragraph 058 Reference ID: 4-058-20150326) in the Government’s *Planning Practice Guidance* the proposed development is well within the 20 hectares threshold for an “Industrial Estate Development Project” and would not lead to a significant increase in traffic, emissions and noise. If deemed to be an “Urban Development Project”, the “Indicative Screening Thresholds” state:

‘Environmental Impact Assessment is unlikely to be required for the redevelopment of land unless the new development is on a significantly greater scale than the previous use, or the types of impact are of a markedly different nature or there is a high level of contamination’.

For the reasons set out in this Screening Request it is clear that none of these apply. In addition, the area of the proposed development is just 1.21 hectares (well below the 5 hectares indicative threshold) and although proposing more than 10,000m² of floorspace, the development would not have any significant urbanising effects in a previously non-urbanised area.

The proposed development is substantially in accordance with the parameters of the previously approved development. There has been no material change in planning circumstances since these permissions were granted so, in terms of consistency, it would be appropriate to reach the same conclusion that the proposal would not be likely to have significant environmental effects on the environment by virtue of factors such as its nature, size or location. Any effects are not likely to be so significant as to require EIA as generally indicated by the “Indicative Screening Thresholds” and the previous conclusions on this matter.

Similarly, it is considered that the supporting assessments listed above will ensure that any environmental effects can be satisfactorily addressed or mitigated through the proposed development. For example, areas or species of identified ecological importance will be protected, or their loss compensated or mitigated. Effects on air and noise quality will be addressed through a Travel Plan, which seeks to encourage the use of sustainable modes of travel to the site, as at present. Effects on the use of natural resources and the production of waste will be managed through encouraging efficiency in the use of materials and use of the waste hierarchy during construction and occupation. It is anticipated that such measures would be subject to control under planning conditions imposed on the grant of any future planning permission, as previously.

Conclusion - EIA Screening

This Screening Request is submitted as the prospective development falls within Schedule 2 Development of the EIA Regulations. However, it has identified that the application will be submitted with a full suite of supporting documentation which can adequately assess the relative impacts of the proposed development upon the environment and mitigate, where necessary, to ensure no undue adverse effects on the environment. As development at the BSP already operates very successfully and as the proposed development is to match and complement existing activities (renewing a previous permission), it is concluded that the



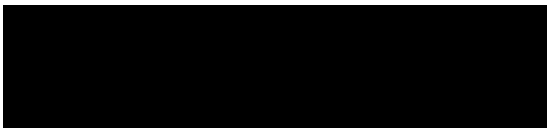
proposed development will not give rise to such significant environmental effects as to warrant an Environmental Impact Assessment.

As outlined within the National Planning Policy Guidance (Paragraph: 002 Reference ID: 4-002-20140306, March 2014), only a very small proportion of Schedule 2 projects will require an assessment, and it is not considered that the effects of the development are likely to be significant and therefore it is our contention that EIA is not required.

We look forward to receiving the Council's formal opinion as to whether Schedule 2 applies and subsequently, whether EIA is, or is not required as soon as possible and, in any event, no later than three weeks from the receipt of this Request.

We trust that you have everything you require to confirm the Council's Screening Opinion, but please do not hesitate to contact me or my colleagues Duncan Chadwick or Charlie Brown, if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely



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