

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan 2041

Statement of Common Ground

Between

Vale of White Horse District Council,

South Oxfordshire District Council,

and

Bidwells on behalf of

Oxford Brookes University

March 2026

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This Statement of Common Ground (SOCG) has been prepared by Vale of White Horse District Council and South Oxfordshire District Council (“the councils”) and Bidwells on behalf of Oxford Brookes University, hereafter referred to as “the parties”. This SOCG documents those matters agreed with regard to the South and Vale Joint Local Plan 2041 and supporting documents, to assist the Inspectors during the examination of the local plan.
- 1.2. This SOCG particularly relates to the proposed allocation of land at Harcourt Hill Campus as set out in Policy AS15 of the Joint Local Plan. The agreed and outstanding matters have been structured to assist the Inspectors through the examination process.
- 1.3. The councils propose the site for allocation for predominantly educational uses in the Joint Local Plan, with the provision / retention of educational and sports facilities.
- 1.4. A previous SOCG was prepared for this site in April 2016 between Vale of White Horse District Council and West Waddy (representing Oxford Brookes University) and Harcourt Hill Estate Residents Association as part of the Vale of

White Horse Local Plan 2031 process, which is available to view on the council's website¹.

- 1.5. This SOCG initially sets out the background/context of the site, Section 3 then sets out the agreed matters and Section 4 identifies outstanding matters between the parties.

2. Background / Context

- 2.1. Harcourt Hill Campus is one of three main sites occupied by Oxford Brookes University, and provides teaching facilities, student accommodation and supporting uses, including sports facilities. This included theological education and teachers' training from 1959 to 2000 when Westminster College ceased independent operations under the Methodist Church and merged with Oxford Brookes University. From 2000 until 2025, the site became the Harcourt Hill Campus of Oxford Brookes University, hosting the Westminster Institute of Education, which continued teacher training and related studies until 2025.
- 2.2. The Campus is owned by the Methodist Church, who lease the site to Oxford Brookes University. Westminster College Oxford Trust is a registered charity (Charity No. 309672) that promotes higher education and training in the interests of the Methodist Church. The University commenced a 99-year lease on the site in 2017.
- 2.3. Harcourt Hill Campus is located in a partially wooded section of the Oxford Green Belt on the urban-rural fringe to the south of the settlement of Botley and west of the village of North Hinksey and the A34. The Harcourt Hill Campus allocation is 22.72 hectares. The Raleigh Park Lowland Fen habitat crosses the north-eastern border of the site.
- 2.4. Oxford Brookes University is reviewing the future role of the campus. The University ceased all teaching activity at Harcourt Hill in 2025 and will now need to implement a strategy for the future of the site in consultation with the Westminster College Oxford Trust.

Local Plans

Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 Part 1 (adopted 2016)

- 2.5. This plan's Core Policy 9: Harcourt Hill Campus supports the development of "an agreed masterplan that sets a clear vision for the future use of the site", with Vale of White Horse District Council stating it will work proactively with Oxford Brookes University, Oxfordshire County Council, local residents and other appropriate stakeholders to help the University develop this.

¹https://data.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/java/support/dynamic_serve.jsp?ID=910615862&CODE=40C6EAFE806D3A1558B3E8EF0CCDC046

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan 2041 (submitted December 2024)

- 2.6. The Joint Local Plan 2041's Policy AS15 – Harcourt Hill Campus allocates the site and states that if proposing significant change, the landowner / leaseholder of the campus is required to work proactively with the council, Oxfordshire County Council, local residents and other appropriate stakeholders to develop a masterplan that meets the need for predominantly educational uses. Policy AS15 adds that proposals for the upgrading or redevelopment of the Harcourt Hill Campus will be supported in principle where guided by an agreed masterplan (or any approved updates to it) that sets a clear vision for the future use of the site.

Joint Local Plan consultation

- 2.7. In February 2024 Bidwells submitted a response on behalf of Oxford Brookes University as part of the Regulation 18 Preferred Options public consultation. This response set out their position on the Preferred Options version of Policy AS15 and their future plans for Harcourt Hill Campus. The University's response to the Regulation 18 Preferred Options Consultation is attached at Appendix 1. The councils considered OBU's response and proposed changes as set out in the Preferred Options Consultation Statement ([examination library reference LPP07](#)) prior to publication of the Regulation 19 version of the Plan.
- 2.8. Oxford Brookes University did not submit a representation as part of the Regulation 19 publication period on the basis it did not consider it necessary to update the position set out in their response to the Regulation 18 Preferred Options consultation as the University's plans were not sufficiently advanced and the Regulation 19 version of the Plan was not consistent with their response at Regulation 18.

Vale of White Horse Playing Pitch Strategy (2024) and Vale of White Horse Leisure Facility Assessment and Strategy (2024)

- 2.9. Harcourt Hill Campus has a number of sports pitches used for football, rugby, lacrosse and American football, as identified in the adopted Vale of White Horse Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) (2024) ([examination library reference HPL06.2](#)). The site also has an activity hall, gym, studios and squash courts which are available for community use during extensive opening hours, as identified by the adopted Vale of White Horse Leisure Facilities Assessment and Strategy (LFAS) (2024) ([examination library reference HPL04.4](#)). There is also a swimming pool on site which has since closed as Oxford Brookes University did not identify a viable business case to support the new investment required to keep the facility in operation.
- 2.10. Both the PPS and LFAS advise that these facilities should be retained or enhanced as part of redevelopment unless an assessment has demonstrated

that there is an excess of provision and they are surplus to requirements, or there is clear evidence to support their relocation.

Neighbourhood Plan

North Hinksey Parish Neighbourhood Plan (made May 2021)

- 2.11. The Harcourt Hill Campus site allocation sits within the North Hinksey Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan (made May 2021).
- 2.12. The Neighbourhood Plan contains Policy BU1: Oxford Brookes University Harcourt Hill Campus, alongside several other policies that relate directly to the site, including those addressing transport, social infrastructure, utilities, green spaces and the natural environment.

3. Agreed Matters

Matters on which the Parties Agree

- 3.1. The parties agree that the inclusion of a policy specific to the Harcourt Hill Campus site will assist in the future development or redevelopment of the site.
- 3.2. Subject to the outstanding matters set out in Section 4, the parties agree that Policy AS15: Harcourt Hill Campus identifies an appropriate approach to ensuring any future development at the campus is delivered comprehensively and will be delivered in accordance with the requirements set out in the policy.
- 3.3. The parties agree with the principle of providing/retaining sports facilities on site as set out in Policy AS15.
- 3.4. The parties will work positively together to ensure there is adequate planning for infrastructure necessary to support any future development at Harcourt Hill Campus.
- 3.5. The parties are committed to continued partnership working, including regular meetings, to ensure the optimum outcome for the site.
- 3.6. The site is not subject to any insurmountable environmental or technical constraints that would otherwise impede development, however the Methodist Church own the freehold of the University's long lease (91 years unexpired) and will be a stakeholder in the site's future.

4. Outstanding Matters

- 4.1. The University is unclear who 'agrees' the Masterplan and what if parties included disagree on key elements? There needs to be more clarity in the wording to allow for a balanced approach in the face of competing views of what the Masterplan should be and a recognition that the statutory process may

bring forward more evidence and changes to the Masterplan. The University is concerned that the Policy may be superseded if educational use of the campus declines or ceases as part of the ongoing review. The University recommends the Policy allows for this outcome.

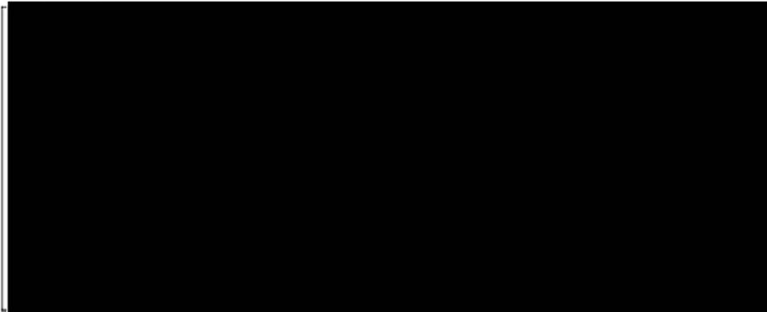
- 4.2. The University is concerned that the Policy may be superseded if educational use of the campus declines or ceases as part of the ongoing review. The University recommends the Policy allows for this outcome.
- 4.3. The University considers that the future of sporting use on the site may change having regard to the needs of education, future use and viability, and considers there will have to be a resolution of existing sporting provision in accordance with paragraph 104 of the December 2024 version of the NPPF (paragraph 103 of the December 2023 version of the NPPF).

5. Conclusion

- 5.1. The parties are working jointly to ensure the optimum outcome for the site. The parties will continue to work cooperatively on all matters of mutual interest.

Signatures

Signed on behalf of Vale of White Horse District Council and South Oxfordshire District Council

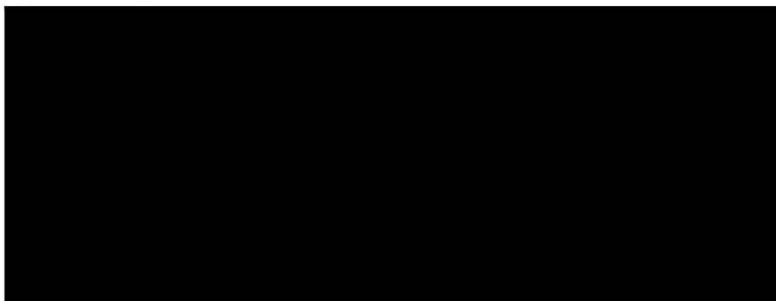


Name: Tim Oruye

Job Title: Head of Policy and Programmes

Date: 31 March 2026

Signed by Bidwells on behalf of Oxford Brookes University



Name: Chris Pattison

Job Title: Head of Planning

Date 30th March 2026

DD: [REDACTED]
E: [REDACTED]
Date: 26/02/2024 v2

Planning Policy –
South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils

Dear Sir/Madam,

**SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE AND VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCIL
JOINT LOCAL PLAN PREFERRED OPTIONS (REGULATION 18) CONSULTATION**

We write on behalf of Oxford Brookes University ('OBU') ('the University') in response to the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse ('VoWH') Joint Local Plan Preferred Options (Regulation 18) Consultation. The University welcomes the opportunity to comment on the preferred options and proposed policy wording. For the reasons set out below the University wish to OBJECT to Policy AS15.

Policy AS15 (Harcourt Hill Campus) seeks to replace the former Core Policy 9 and sets out policy guidelines for the redevelopment of OBU's Harcourt Hill Campus, as outlined below. The Council's preferred option seeks to make updates to the wording of the existing policy '*to reflect the retention of the educational focus of the site and recreational use*'. The changes to the wording of the existing policy, proposed by the Council, are shown below, where the deletions are shown in the red and additions shown in green.

Core Policy 9 / Policy AS15 – Harcourt Hill campus

~~The Council will work proactively with Oxford Brookes University, Oxfordshire County Council, local residents and other appropriate stakeholders to help the university to develop a masterplan for the Harcourt Hill campus that meets the university's longer term business needs for predominantly educational uses and~~ ~~If proposing significant change, the landowner/Oxford Brookes University is required to work proactively with the district council, local residents and other appropriate stakeholders to develop a masterplan for the Harcourt Hill Campus Site (as shown on the Policies Map) that meets the needs for predominantly educational uses and~~ in a manner that respects its Green Belt setting and urban-rural fringe context.

Proposals for the upgrading or redevelopment of the Harcourt Hill Campus will be supported in principle where guided by an agreed masterplan that sets a clear vision for the future use of the site. The agreed masterplan and any subsequent proposals should be prepared to clearly identify and address key site issues including, but not limited to, the following matters:

- a) The scale of development proposed and intended uses;
- b) ~~The provision/retention of educational and sports facilities;~~
- c) The integration of built form into the landscape which will be assessed at the planning application stage with reference to a comprehensive landscape, tree and planting strategy;
- d) Sustainable site access including by ~~a network of footways and cycle routes~~, public transport, and the effective management of car trips and car parking demand ~~to a level that can safely be accommodated on the local road network~~; and
- e) The safeguarding of long-distance views of the site from Oxford and to ensure that new development does not detract from views of the existing spires by reason of its height or form.

As communicated to VoWH Council previously, the University are in the process of undertaking a strategic review of their estate which is directing investment towards the University's main campus in Headington,

where services and support for students is concentrated. As a consequence, the University intends to cease all teaching activity at Harcourt Hill by the start of the 2025/26 academic year, at which time the University will need to implement a strategy for the future of the site, including a review of sporting and residential activities at the site, which are likely to migrate, closer to the Headington campus. As a long term leaseholder, the University is already working collaboratively with Westminster College in resolving the future of the campus.

Irrespective of whether the campus pivots to another educational provider and/or the site is brought forward for an alternative use, the site will require comprehensive redevelopment as the majority of buildings on the site are nearing end-of-life. Whatever the outcome of the review, the Harcourt Campus is going to see substantial change. The University is keen to engage with all relevant stakeholders to prepare a strategy conducive to facilitating the exit of the University from Harcourt Campus and delivering a legacy to the benefit of stakeholders, including the local community.

The Council are already aware of these changes and therefore we are surprised to see the proposed policy reaffirming the historic position, rather than looking forward and supporting a positive change process, similar to the approach taken in respect of the former Council offices at Crowmarsh Gifford, where an allocation has been identified in response to current redundancy and future plans. We would expect a similar approach to be applied to Harcourt Hill.

The University wish to see the removal of the site from the Green Belt in anticipation of change. The site is capable of being sensitively developed by way of a sympathetic masterplan/design code for a variety of site uses, without being subject to its current Green Belt designation or prescriptive policy limitations. Nearby in South Oxfordshire, Land at the University's Wheatley Camps was inset from the Green Belt and now benefits from outline planning permission for c.500 new dwellings. Here, the University is leaving a positive legacy, not least through the reprovision of improved community sport facilities. Overall, it is considered that the removal of the Harcourt Hill Campus site from the Green Belt as a strategic opportunity site would be conducive to delivering positive change and community benefit.

To support removal from the Green Belt, a review of the LUC assessment is appended in **Appendix 1** with a view to arriving at a more accurate and specific assessment of the importance of the site in Green Belt terms. We consider the site could be released without negatively impacting on the purposes of the Green Belt, with change being positively managed through a Masterplan and/or Design Code.

At the very least, substantive change across the site in terms of redevelopment and a wider range of uses needs to be captured in the Policy. Our proposed changes to the Policy wording are outlined in **Appendix 2** accordingly.

These matters are raised in the spirit of dialogue and in support of managing positive change as well as a legacy for the community. I trust that they will be considered carefully before the next iteration of the Plan. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss such matters and to agree a suitable way forward.

Yours faithfully

██████████
██████

APPENDIX 1

PARCEL BO1 – GREEN BELT REVIEW

The Harcourt Hill site is located within the Oxford Green Belt and is subject to significant development. The campus is home to a range of subjects, including the School of Education. The original Westminster College, founded in 1851, has had a home in Harcourt Hill since the 1950s and merged with Oxford Brookes University in 2000. In 2012 Westminster Hall was opened, providing modern, purpose-built residential accommodation for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In 2015, LUC undertook an independent review of the Oxford Green Belt. The study assessed the performance of the Green Belt against a series of criteria that reflect its statutory purposes. The study divides the Green Belt into a series of “parcels” and “broad areas”. The Harcourt Hill Campus is located within Parcel BO1 which sits to the south of Botley.

The study scored the Parcel against the four relevant purposes of the Green Belt, as set out in Paragraph 143 of the National Planning Policy Framework (‘NPPF’), and concluded the following:

GREEN BELT PURPOSE		SCORE
1 – To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas.	1a – Protection of open land from urban sprawl.	MEDIUM
	1b – Ability of boundaries/features to contain development and prevent urban sprawl.	HIGH
2 – To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another.		LOW
3 – To assist in the safeguarding of the countryside from encroachment.		MEDIUM
4 – To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns.		HIGH

Table 1: LUC Assessment of Green Belt Parcel BO1

The wider parcel was assessed as performing modestly (medium) in relation to protecting land from urban sprawl, however, the assessment acknowledged that the Harcourt Campus, with its several large buildings, associated floodlit sport facilities and car parks already have an urbanising influence.

The wider parcel was assessed as performing very well (high) in terms of containing development and preventing urban sprawl, however, the Harcourt Hill Campus site is already developed. As such it is not considered that the removal of this site from the Green Belt to enable its comprehensive re-development would affect the role of the surrounding Green Belt in performing this function.

The wider parcel scored weakly (low) in its role of preventing neighbouring towns merging into one another. The assessment outlines that *‘The parcel is predominantly an open area situated on elevated topography that reduces in elevation from Cumnor Hill in the northwest towards the A34. Botley and the suburb of New Botley are separated by a very narrow gap in parcels OX19 and OX20, so BO1 located to the south-east of Botley, makes a more limited contribution to settlement separation. The presence of existing development within the parcel, on elevated ground visible from Oxford but separated by the A34 and Thames corridor, also limits the extent to which further development would result in perceived erosion of the settlement gap. The parcel does not contribute significantly to separation between Botley any other settlements considered under this Green Belt Purpose, with wooded hills providing clear separation to the south and west.’*

In terms of assisting the safeguarding of the countryside from encroachment, the wider parcel was assessed as performing moderately (medium) overall, however, the assessment acknowledges that

already *'The centre of the parcel contains a higher education college with several large buildings, associated floodlit sports facilities and car parks, and development immediately to the north and south of the College combines with this to have an urbanising influence on the rest of the countryside within the parcel.'*

Finally, the wider parcel performed very well (high) in its role of contributing to the setting and 'special character of Oxford', though this is understood to be principally a product of its large areas of green space which form part of the green backdrop to Oxford as seen in views from the city centre and high ground to the east. This is in addition to Raleigh Park which provides one of the key views into Central Oxford. The rights of way through the parcel also add to its significance as does the presence of one of the conduit houses built in the early 17th Century. The Harcourt Hill Campus in comparison, is not understood, to contribute towards this key function of the wider parcel.

Overall, the assessment concludes that the existing development on the campus contributes towards an urban-edge character and has an urbanising influence on the rest of the countryside within the parcel. The presence of the existing development limits the extent to which the parcel contributes to the separation between Botley and other settlements, as well as the extent to which further development would result in perceived erosion of the settlement gap. On this basis, we believe that a Green Belt Review is warranted in this location to determine in isolation the contribution of Harcourt Hill Campus to the Green Belt and its functions.

APPENDIX 2

POLICY AS15: HARCOURT HILL

- 1) If proposing significant change, the landowner/Oxford Brookes University is required to work proactively with the district council, Oxfordshire County Council, local residents and other appropriate stakeholders to develop a masterplan for the Harcourt Hill Campus site (as shown on the Policies Map) ~~that meets the needs for predominantly educational uses and in a manner that respects its Green Belt setting and urban rural fringe context.~~ Proposals for the upgrading or redevelopment of the Harcourt Hill Campus will be supported in principle where guided by an agreed masterplan that sets a clear vision for the future use of the site. The agreed masterplan and any subsequent proposals should be prepared to clearly identify and address key site issues including, but not limited to, the following matters:
- a) The scale of development proposed and intended uses;
 - b) ~~The provision/retention of educational and sports facilities~~ The delivery of a positive sporting legacy for the community;
 - c) The integration of built form into the landscape which will be assessed at the planning application stage with reference to a comprehensive landscape, tree, and planting strategy;
 - d) Sustainable site access including by a network of footways and cycle routes, public transport, and the effective management of car trips and car parking demand and

The safeguarding of long-distance views of the site from Oxford and to ensure that new development does not detract from views of the existing spires by reason of its height or form.