

## **PLANNING GROUP**

The Society is for people who care about Oxford, want to enjoy it fully and help shape its future. Our aims are to improve Oxford as a city in which to live and work and to help people to enjoy and appreciate our rich heritage

The main role of the Planning Group is to influence and assess planning applications so that they have as far as possible a positive effect on people's lives. We do this by engaging with all stakeholders from the pre-application to the formal application stage.

### **Membership**

The Group is co-ordinated by Gillian Coates (also the Society's Vice-Chair). Membership has grown in the recent past and as at November 2021 the core group numbers fourteen: Gillian Argyle, Elise Benjamin, Clive Booth, Gillian Coates, Jim Girling, John Goddard, Richard Hayward, Eleanor Howard, Neil MacLennan, David Nimmo Smith, Geoffrey Randell, Sue Stewart, Peter Thompson and Tim Treacher. Other Society members are involved through a special email list

Any Society member is welcome to ask to be added to the group email list which enables us to share news and information on matters as wide ranging as individual domestic applications, large developments, or the City Council's proposals for Local Plan policies up to the year 2050

The Covid epidemic has led us to review the Group's activities. Pre-covid, members would meet fortnightly each Wednesday morning at the Council Offices in St Aldate's to scrutinize selected applications before adjourning to a local café to discuss the day's business. However, since 2020 this aspect of the Group's work is done on-line with comments sent to the session leader. To ensure Group contact we have introduced a fortnightly virtual meeting held on Mondays at 5 pm. Going forward we intend to host a face-to-face quarterly meeting; this will substitute for one of the Monday meetings. The details have yet to be decided.

## **The Group's Work**

The Group meets online to keep up its usual (vital) oversight of all planning applications, it meets with developers to discuss pre-application proposals and also responds to major consultations.

Our meetings with developers provide invaluable opportunities to understand the aims of proposers and designers and to exercise influence on the evolution of the final proposals. We report to Society members through the termly *Visions* publication about some of the more interesting projects. Although it may at first seem technically daunting, new members find that they soon get the hang of things and derive satisfaction and (Yes!) enjoyment from scrutinising applications. We are helped by guidelines issued by the City Council which list the main criteria against which planning applications must be assessed.

We enjoy a good relationship with the planning department and have a formal meeting with officers twice a year. These are mutually beneficial and valued by all concerned.

In 2020 the Council received just under 3000 applications. The Group selected about 950 (32%) for scrutiny because of their potential impact on the public domain or threat to neighbours' quality of life. We submitted comments on 150 applications (or 15% of those we scrutinized) and it is clear from informal feedback and some outcomes that the planning officers valued our comments.

Looking at our work in 2021 there has been a significant increase in major new development proposals – three in Old Marston: Hill View Farm, Mill Lane and Marston Paddock; St Frideswide Farm, Cutteslowe; Thornhill Park, Risinghurst; Bayswater Brook, Barton; Oxford North. We are participating in discussions relating to the developments on the West side of the City – Nuffield West End, Oxford Station, Oxpens and Osney Mead. Additionally, a subset of the Group has been involved with the Broad Street pedestrianisation project and we continue to work with the Council on plans for the regeneration of the Covered Market.

There is a significant number of applications for domestic extensions, loft, garage and garden building conversions, to provide additional living accommodation. Extensions make sense at a time when moving to a larger house may be prohibitively expensive for many people.

We are on the watch for any over-development of a site, potentially causing serious discomfort for neighbours. Poor design is not uncommon, as is the omission of simple but important things like bike and bin stores. Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) are a symptom of Oxford's growing housing shortage. There are currently 1,831 registered HMOs in the City. They are dwellings occupied by three or more unrelated tenants who share cooking or bathroom facilities. The Planning Group examines new HMO applications and is keen to ensure that they satisfy the City's strict criteria. HMOs can be controversial among local residents but they are essential in providing affordable accommodation for key workers who live in the city.

Contact for more information: Gillian Coates, Planning Group Co-ordinator and Vice Chair

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