

We write as members of Council. We believe that the proposed Congregation resolution that Council should act on Option 3 of the Castle Mill Environmental Impact Assessment is unrealistic and therefore unacceptable.

We share the deep concerns of colleagues about the way in which the visual impact of the Castle Mill buildings on Port Meadow has become a matter of contention with the local community, and greatly regret that this has had an adverse effect on our relationship with that community. There are clearly lessons to be learned and such developments must be approached differently in the future.

A rationale for the approval of the Castle Mill development was the need to provide more student rooms and in the context of an agreement with the City that the University would seek to avoid increasing pressure on private rented accommodation.

The University has agreed to reasonable mitigation of the impact of the buildings, and Council proposes, subject to local authority planning processes, to proceed with further work consistent with Option 1. In our view Options 2 and 3 provide only modest additional improvement in the buildings' appearance by comparison with Option 1, but at significantly greater cost; additionally, acting on Option 3 would result in the loss of 38 student rooms, a large proportion of which are family accommodation.

As members of Council, we are bound to act at all times in the best interests of the Charity, and to exercise proper stewardship over its assets.

The estimated cost to the University of Option 3 is in the order of £30m. The precise figure can be debated, but it is certain to be in that region. It is clear to us that at a time when Divisions and Services are making cuts to keep the University on a sustainable financial track, such a sum could not be found without a major impact on core academic activities and without undermining our strategy of seeking to improve students' welfare and experience, particularly in terms of the need to provide graduate students with access to decent, affordable accommodation.

However, the issue is even wider than the question of finding the money. Even if we could, we do not think it right that the University should spend such an amount of money, more than the original cost of buildings, to alter them.

The wider consequences of such a choice need to be clearly recognised in terms of the reputational impact on the University in all its parts. It would provide politicians and funders further argument for constraining the availability of public funds, and if potential donors observed us choosing to spend our existing resources in this way they are likely to be discouraged from assisting us.

For all these reasons we cannot support the proposition and ask that Congregation reject it.

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