

Two positive things emerged from the debate in Congregation on the mitigation of the visual impact of the Castle Mill accommodation. First, there was a clear apology from the University for having failed to follow best practice. Secondly, both sides welcomed imaginative new ideas for reducing the impact of the flats.

We believe that the time is ripe for a constructive dialogue with the City Council and other interested parties about the best way forward. We do not think that supporting Option 3 in the postal ballot will help this process. There are several reasons why:

1. We sense that the overwhelming majority of those who voted against the motion following the Congregation debate did so because of the disproportionate cost of Option 3. The University Council has agreed that up to £6 million might be spent on remediation work. This itself is a substantial sum which would have some impact on the research and educational aims of the University. The question is whether it is reasonable to identify a sum of that kind. We think that it is. By contrast, our students are alarmed at the possibility that the cost of Option 3 could force up University room rents and at what they see as a “waste of their fee money”. We are also very concerned that donors, research councils and other funders would be astonished by our profligacy.
2. Option 3 also has major environmental costs: 124 double-glazed windows, 166 doors, 33 fitted kitchens and bathrooms, and 2000m² of roofing would end up in a skip. Based on WRAP data, the project would generate something like 15-25,000 tonnes of embodied carbon dioxide. We believe that many people in Oxford, struggling to afford decent housing, would be outraged at the wasteful destruction of newly built accommodation.
3. The price tag associated with Option 3 is disputed, but no-one seems to doubt that it would bear comparison with the cost of constructing Castle Mill in the first place. Some have argued that the cost is a justifiable slap-on-the-wrist for a careless and supposedly philistine administration. However, the consequences of finding this money would certainly not fall on those whom they might wish to blame. The impact would fall heavily on our graduate student community through the loss of top quality accommodation. OUSU are also concerned about the potential wider impacts on scholarships and future accommodation projects.
4. A decision in favour of Option 3 would pre-empt any dialogue between the City and the University and force the University down a single costly path. We believe that the University is ready to listen and keen to engage with the collective expertise among its staff and academics and with the local community. We encourage colleagues to be active and imaginative in that engagement. There are steps that can be taken which would mitigate the impact of these buildings without opening us to charges of profligacy and worse.

We believe that constructive dialogue is the best way forward with a view to identifying other approaches than the wasteful and outrageously costly Option 3. Accordingly we ask you not to support the motion in the postal ballot.

Signatories to the flysheet:

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