

At its meeting of 10 February, Congregation decisively voted down a Resolution to instruct Council to proceed with Option 3. As members of the University's Planning and Resource Allocation Committee, we feel that it is important for the wider membership of Congregation to engage fully with the issues at stake. We believe a clear rejection of the resolution in the postal ballot is important for the welfare of our students, the interests of the Oxford community and the integrity of the University.

The resolution implicitly instructs Council to remove one floor from most of the fully occupied graduate accommodation blocks at Castle Mill – an option that was reviewed and rejected by the independent consultants who produced the Environmental Statement on the grounds of its disproportionate social and economic consequences.

We want to avoid such deleterious consequences to our students and the local community. We intend instead to initiate a broad consultation with local residents, students and other stakeholders on the most effective approaches to improving the buildings' appearance. Many creative ideas were raised at the meeting, including growing green walls and selective demolition of certain blocks in 20 or 30 years, when they will naturally be in need of refurbishment, and we are confident that many others, equally good, will come forward. Obviously, any scheme would be subject to the usual planning approval process in the City, after it had been approved by Buildings and Estates Subcommittee and Council.

The constraints we would place on such alternative schemes would be that they would mitigate the impact on the visual environment while minimizing disruption to students and deleterious impacts on the Oxford community, and that they could be achieved within a budget that could be handled within the Graduate Accommodation account. A sensible guide would be the £6M estimated by the environmental consultants as the cost of Option 1. Even this, it should be noted, will necessitate above-inflation rises to student rents, and delays in the next phase of graduate housing, but we would endeavour to minimize these adverse effects.

Implementing Option 3 would have a profound negative impact on the University's academic programmes, in addition to the disruptive effects on students and residents alike. Much has been made of the allegedly weak costing of Option 3 by the consultants, and it is appropriate for this to be challenged. Certainly determining the exact costs of this work will require significant costly professional investigation. We do not feel we can advise you to assume that the costs would be significantly lower than £30M. However, there are many other unknowns. Our own surveyors are unconvinced that it is structurally or logistically practicable to remove one floor of these buildings. Moreover, given the layout of the site, they are very doubtful whether a phased programme of work on one block at a time could be undertaken without endangering the safety of the remaining residents. This means that it is not reasonable to assume that many students could remain in place during the implementation of Option 3.

Currently, Oxford houses about 53% of its graduate students in College and University accommodation that is appropriate, safe and affordable. There is understandably great demand for this accommodation from students, and the alternatives are not always ideal. It is certainly not the case that the City has a sufficient supply of spare rooms to accommodate many more of our students. At Castle Mill, we are able to provide purpose-built units for young families and disabled students. Accordingly, we want to increase the supply of purpose-built graduate accommodation,

and it would be irresponsible for us to vacate over 300 units of accommodation for the year or two it would take to implement Option 3. The impact on housing costs and availability for Oxford residents and students alike of transferring this number of students to the private rental market over this period would compound the problem, and damage community relations.

The proponents of Option 3 have argued that their Resolution would have relatively little impact on our finances, and therefore on our academic plans. However, it is a simple fact that the costs of Option 3 would have to be borne by reducing the resources available for planned activities, (e.g. departmental spending from reserves, graduate student matching funds, recruitment, the capital plan, and so on). It is important that colleagues do not discount these carefully considered and independent professional estimates of the likely costs.

Having taken due regard of these likely consequences to our academic plans, those present at the meeting of Congregation voted by a large margin that the resolution could not be supported. To vote for the resolution, one must necessarily have convinced oneself that such expenditure on such a purpose is the best way of employing the university's resources to achieve its charitable objectives: the pursuit of learning through teaching and research. We do not believe that such a conclusion is reasonable, and so urge all members of Congregation to vote **against** the Resolution in the postal ballot.

Signed

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