

Greater Cambridgeshire Shared Planning,  
The Guildhall,  
Market Square,  
Cambridge,  
CB2 3QJ

30 January 2026

Dear Sir or Madam,

## **Response to Draft Greater Cambridge Local Plan on behalf of Cambridge United Football Club**

1. Cambridge United Football Club (the Club) is pleased to respond to the Greater Cambridge Local Plan (GCLP) Regulation 18 consultation.
2. The Club is a vital civic institution and an integral part of the local community in Cambridge - the city that is the global birthplace of the rules of modern football in 1848. The Club was formed in 1912 and have played at the Cledara Abbey Stadium since 1932. The stadium currently has a capacity of just under 8,000 - a number restricted by health and safety requirements. The Club is proud of the role it plays in the city on and off the pitch as its professional football club.
3. After a number of challenging decades during which the Club both went into administration and non-league at the same time as selling its stadium, Cambridge United is now very stable off the field and ambitious to play an even bigger role for the city on and off the pitch. We now own the Cledara Abbey after repurchasing it from Grosvenor in September 2022.
4. The Owners and Board see either redevelopment of the current site or potential relocation as critical to the Club's long term viability and sustainability at a time when its current capacity is constrained, the City will grow exponentially and the financial pressures for all football clubs at every level are growing given the flow of investment into all the English leagues. We hope the GCLP will prioritise the Club's needs, recognising its unique role in Cambridge

## **Greater Cambridge's Growth**

5. The Government's commitment to supercharge sustainable growth in Greater Cambridge is well understood and reflected in the emerging GCLP. Cambridge United fully supports this and has played a constructive and active role in helping Cambridge collectively make its case to Government over the last year.
6. The GCLP aims is to deliver almost 50,000 new homes, nearly doubling the city's population, and providing 73,000 new jobs by 2041.
7. It is the stated ambition of Peter Freeman, Chair of the Cambridge Growth Company, for Cambridge to be 'the most liveable city in Europe by 2050' and it is widely recognised by everyone that to grow successfully Cambridge needs to do so in a way that widens opportunity for the poorest parts of the city - and its young people in particular - as well as deepening Cambridge's artistic, cultural and sporting capital. To support this, there will need to be an expansion of social, recreational and cultural facilities together with other services the community needs. As the city grows rapidly, we see an expanded active role for the Club in strengthening community cohesion, engaging with different communities across the city and deepening Cambridge's civic cultural identity. In short, the Club needs to grow in step with the city to realise all our collective ambitions.
8. At this exciting inflection point for Cambridge and as one of civic organisations with the greatest reach in the city, Cambridge United wants to continue to be an active partner in the GCLP and the wider conversation about how the city can grow. We want to step forward and play the most active part we can to ensure that sport- alongside culture, and entertainment - are at the heart of the new plan, and that the Club's social and cultural role is both fully recognised and used fully in the most positive way possible for the Cambridge of the future.

## Background And Context

9. Cambridge United is capacity constrained. At the moment we are able to meet fan demand but on current trends that will likely soon become a bigger challenge. Over the last 10 years there has been a 31% increase in attendance, and the occupancy has been over 90% in the last two seasons. We want to continue to grow the fan base so as many people as possible can experience live professional football regularly.
10. Three years ago, the Club bought back the Cledara Abbey Stadium, and over the last 18 months, the Club and their consultants have been investigating ways to increase the capacity of the Cledara Abbey Stadium. As majority owner Paul Barry said publicly in the autumn, the build costs and the compact nature of the site, the proximity of housing and protected open space all combine to make redevelopment highly challenging with no return on what would be very significant investment for well over 20 years. Plans have, therefore, been put on hold.
11. At the same time the Club is seeking to deepen its role within the community. Cambridge United's role goes well beyond the football pitch on a matchday. Through our Foundation it runs around 20 programmes mostly in the poorest parts of the city providing social value of well over £1m annually. Their leadership role and work in tackling misogyny and violence against women and girls through football was praised by Government Minister Jess Philips in December. We are very proud of our women's team and have ambitious plans for that part of the Club going forward.
12. Earlier this month the Club launched 'United for Cambridge', a new movement designed to strengthen and expand the community impact of Cambridge United and its Foundation. United for Cambridge will enable organisations to come together at a pivotal moment for the city, helping Cambridge United Foundation to develop its work in new areas and create more opportunities for people who need them most. The movement reflects a shared ambition to harness the power of football to deliver lasting social impact across Greater Cambridge.
13. We were very pleased that civic leaders gave their public support to this, recognising our unique and vital role in Cambridge.
14. For example, Cameron Holloway, the Leader Cambridge City Council, said:  
*"As one of our biggest institutions Cambridge United is a real asset for the city on and off the pitch. The City Council values its relationship with the Club and the work we are doing together towards a fairer Cambridge."*
15. Peter Freeman, the Chair of the Cambridge Growth Company, said:  
*"Cambridge United brings different parts of the city together in a way few organisations can. Through football and its community outreach, the Club has an important role to play in Cambridge's future."*
16. Paul Bristow, the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, said:  
*"Cambridge United is an exemplar of a football club rooted in its community that is helping change lives through sport. We value our collaboration with the Club and I am sure it will have an ever more important role to play in the city as Cambridge grows."*
17. Bridget Smith, the Leader of South Cambridgeshire District Council, said:  
*"As Cambridge grows it is important to ensure our communities, both urban and rural, are engaged in the future. Cambridge United and the Foundation are part of the glue that bonds the City and South Cambridgeshire's past, present and future."*
18. In this context, the Club would like the Draft GCLP to provide planning policy support for the Club to improve the Cledara Abbey Stadium, potentially in phases, to increase the capacity and

facilities on matchdays, but also to ensure that the stadium is used on non-matchdays as an important facility for the local community. Improving the Stadium would have significant cultural and socio-economic benefits for the local area, noting that the Abbey is the most deprived ward in Cambridge, and the Club represents an important source of civic pride and community identity. We have been looking at a capacity circa 11,000 over recent times

19. However, if, as seems likely, the Cledara Abbey Stadium cannot be improved in a way that is financially viable, to safeguard the Club's long-term future, the Club will work with the Council and others to identify potential alternative sites to ensure that its current capacity does not constrain both the Club's and the city's wider ambitions. This could potentially mean a new multi-purpose designed arena with a minimum 15,000 capacity which could potentially be expanded.
20. If the Club did relocate, the current stadium would obviously then need to be redeveloped to help finance any relocation.

## **Response to the Local Plan Consultation**

### **Policy S/AMC/AS – Abbey Stadium**

21. The Club supports the designation of the Cledara Abbey Stadium as an Area of Major Change and is supportive of the Draft Policy's recognition that development on the site would be supported.
22. However, to be effective and to facilitate the improvement of the stadium, the policy needs to be flexible. The Club is concerned about the restrictive nature of some elements of the draft Policy. There is a need to add more flexibility to the draft Policy to ensure that the Club can make the very best use of the site in a way that is viable and sustainable.
23. The key aim of any potential stadium redevelopment would be to increase the capacity and number of fans able to attend games, while also enhancing the matchday experience through an improved hospitality offer, and encourage wider non-matchday use by the local community. These aspirations should be explicitly referenced and supported in the wording of the draft Policy.
24. We have provided alternative wording at **Appendix A** of this letter.
25. We also consider that criteria a) to j) and point 2 need to be amended as explained below.

### **Criterion a) The Masterplan**

26. While a masterplanned vision for future development on the site is appropriate, there needs to be recognition that a degree of flexibility is required, and that this masterplan may not be delivered all at once, owing to viability and time constraints. As such, while reference to a wider masterplanned vision of the site is understood, there should be recognition and allowance for flexibility built into the criterion to allow a phased development.

### **Criteria b) to e) Transport and Accessibility**

27. Whilst football stadiums can generate high levels of transport demand for short periods of time, it is important to note that the Cledara Abbey Stadium is already well served by existing transport infrastructure, with further improvements coming forward. The site benefits from close proximity to Cambridge North, Cambridge Central and the forthcoming Cambridge East station, all of which are within reasonable walking distances. This distribution of stations enables the dispersal of supporters across multiple routes, reducing concentrated pressure on any single point of the network. The Stadium also has access to Park & Ride services and is well connected to the wider transport system via established pedestrian and cycle routes, including the Chisholm Trail, which provides a direct and sustainable link between key parts of the city

and Cambridge North. Together, these connections ensure that the Stadium is accessible by a range of sustainable travel modes. Further details on the specifics of the emerging strategic transport options of relevance to the accessibility of the site are outlined below.

28. It is well understood that there are road capacity issues on Newmarket Road, but it is not realistic to expect that the matchday use of an enlarged stadium will require the Club to:
  - Improve bus infrastructure; or
  - Resolve road network capacity on matchdays; or
  - Improve cycling and pedestrian provision off the site.
29. It is recognised that the movement of people to and from the stadium can cause disruption on a matchday. The Club would, therefore, be committed to bring forward further measures as part of any planning application to address this issue. However, it should be recognised that there are wider factors that impact the highways network, and any impact associated with the Club is typically restricted to a limited period of time on matchdays (circa 25 days per annum). Therefore, rather than a blanket policy requiring any redevelopment to solve issues that go beyond the Club, we believe a nuanced approach should be taken.
30. The Club believes that improvements to matchday traffic can be made through soft interventions, and would commit to delivering these through a Matchday Management and Travel Plan associated with a redeveloped stadium (and the associated capacity uplift). These interventions would focus on promoting active travel, encouraging behavioural change to reduce private vehicle use at peak times, and improving overall travel planning for supporters. The Club would also commit to working proactively with the local authority to manage and enforce appropriate parking controls in the surrounding area, ensuring that matchday operations minimise impacts on nearby residential streets and deliver a more sustainable and coordinated transport strategy.
31. This is very much our approach at the moment. The Club is already active in collaborating with transport providers and local stakeholders, including Stagecoach and Camcycle, and will continue to work with these partners to support effective, sustainable and community-focused transport solutions regardless of any redevelopment as it is the right thing to do.
32. This approach would be consistent with paragraph 110 of the NPPF with regard to encouraging sustainable transport choices, and ensuring there are a variety of options available. The introduction of nuance, and proportional interventions would ensure the draft Policy remains consistent with the NPPF.
33. Further to this, it should be highlighted that additional strategic transport investments are already under development by external bodies, such as the GCP, which will help to materially improve the baseline congestion issues surrounding the stadium and along Newmarket Road.
34. Phase 1 of the GCP Eastern Access Scheme will provide improved cycleways, bus lanes and pavements along Newmarket Road, while the accompanying Newmarket Road Travel Hub will support safe, efficient, and sustainable access to the stadium and our community facilities on both matchday and non-matchdays. Whilst the details surrounding the bus services that will run to and from the Travel Hub are still to be determined, the Club strongly support additional services on matchdays and the option to run dedicated shuttle services for certain supporter groups to further address road network capacity concerns.
35. In addition to the above, East West Rail have recently announced that a new East Cambridge Railway Station now forms part of the main scope of their project, providing the possibility of a new high-capacity public transport option within walking distance of the stadium. The proximity of the proposed new rail station just 2km from the stadium could feasibly encourage more supporters from the outskirts of Cambridge to travel via rail and subsequently utilise the pedestrian link via Coldham's Common for the first / last parts of their journeys.

36. In summary, the Club is determined to lessen the vehicular impacts within the vicinity of the stadium, particularly on matchdays, and supports the strategic transport investments already planned to benefit the Club. However, with reference to Policy S/AMC/AS, the Club should only be expected to seek to reduce direct transport impacts by encouraging and helping to facilitate the use of sustainable travel modes. The Club will encourage the use of sustainable transport and active travel, and this should be reflected in the draft Policy.

## **Criterion f) Existing Trees**

37. The Club want to protect all trees on the site, but that simply might not be possible were the stadium to be improved. This should be explicitly recognised. The reality is that the stadium is adjacent to open space. Tree planting will not 'soften' the impact. Seeing the stadium from the open space will not be a surprise to anyone as it has been there for nearly 100 years.

## **Criteria g) to h) and j) Site Constraints and Nearby Sites**

38. There is also a greater need for flexibility in the policy wording in relation to where development can take place, and the policy boundaries. Draft Policy S/AMC/AS explicitly recognises that the Cledara Abbey Stadium site is constrained to the west and south (through ecological assets, open space and allotments). However, there is little flexibility in the policy wording that allow encroachment into these areas if, on planning balance, the benefit of ensuring delivery outweighs the harm (which would be mitigated or compensated wherever possible).
39. If there is limited encroachment on land that is protected by other Plan policies, the encroachment must be justified in accordance with those policies, and this does not need to be re-stated in the Policy. However, it should be recognised in this allocation that improving the Abbey Stadium and safeguarding the long-term future of the Club and its role in Cambridge will be given significant weight in assessing the impact of development.

## **Criterion 2 – A Design Led Approach**

40. The design led approach should not seek to limit development, but to make the best use of the site and ensure operational requirements of the Club can be fulfilled.

## **The Potential to Relocate**

41. The Club's stated preference to date is to remain at a redeveloped Cledara Abbey Stadium. However, given the many and obvious constraints, the Owners and Board recognise that this might be neither financially viable nor deliverable. The Club is open-minded about relocation to a site elsewhere. In this situation, the Club would like to work in partnership with the Council and others to help identify an appropriate alternative site that meets both the Club and the city's needs.
42. We have reviewed the other site allocations in the emerging Plan. Given our current location and history in the Abbey ward, an appropriate location could be within any major new urban extension at Cambridge East. This draft allocation allows for the provision for a wide range and scale of cultural, leisure, shops and community uses to meet the needs of the wider city and sub-region. The allocation notes that this may include civic uses, a conference centre, concert hall, arts centre or leisure facilities. Although this list would cover a new football stadium, it would be helpful to refer explicitly in the Plan to Cambridge East being a potential appropriate location for a new stadium for Cambridge United. There may also be other sites that would be appropriate to consider. For example, it is possible to see a future stadium as an anchor of an ambitious new sport, culture and entertainment quarter in the Cambridge of the future. If the Club were to relocate East Cambridge would be our preference for reasons stated. We would also be open to participating in exploratory discussions around other potential sites - for example Hartree given the excellent transport links in the area.

43. We would want to underline that consultation, engagement and the active involvement of our fans would be at the heart of any relocation proposal. The Abbey Stadium is the only home Cambridge United has ever known and, whilst securing the Club's future and maximising the moment of opportunity the city is now in may require a move, we know this is a very sensitive and emotive issue.
44. Such a reference would be consistent with paragraph 98 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which confirms that Councils should plan positively for the provision of community, cultural and recreational facilities, such as sports venues. Taking a proactive approach to support the Club's future, and to invest in the local area (and secure benefits for the local community) is supported by the NPPF.
45. Should a defined allocation not be forthcoming, it would be helpful to include a broad statement of support for the Club's relocation (in the correct circumstances) either within draft Policy S/AMC/AS, or within a bespoke policy that explicitly deals with the Club's relocation within the Plan. We have added appropriate text to Draft Policy S/AMC/AS in **Appendix A**.
46. Should the Club find an appropriate alternative site, and develop a new football stadium on it, it would be appropriate for the current site to be redeveloped for residential or commercial use. In such a scenario, the need to protect the pitch as open space would fall away. As such, to make best use of the land (which is brownfield) the draft policy should recognise the development potential of the site should the Club find an alternative site. This approach would be consistent with paragraphs 104 b) and 124 of the NPPF. We address this point further below in respect of Policy BG/PO.

## **Policy WS/CF – Community, Sports and Leisure Facilities**

47. Draft Policy WS/CF outlines how the Council will consider proposals for the redevelopment of existing, and the development of new sports and leisure facilities.
48. The supporting information confirms that sports stadia are to be considered through this draft policy. It should be explicitly stated in the supporting text that the redevelopment or relocation of the Cledara Abbey Stadium is addressed under a specific allocation, and Policy WS/CF does not apply to the current Stadium or a relocation site.
49. It should also be recognised that football stadia are not Main Town Centre Uses, and that Part C does not apply to ancillary retail, food and beverage provision.

## **Policy BG/PO – Protecting Open Spaces**

50. The Policies Map (2025) shows that the pitch of the Cledara Abbey Stadium is proposed for designation as Protected Open Space, and, therefore, draft Policy BG/PO: Protecting Open Spaces is relevant to the site.
51. In the supporting information for this draft policy, a range of types of open space that are listed. The pitch may fall into the Outdoor Sports Facilities category, as set out in the Draft Greater Cambridge Local Plan: Biodiversity and Green Spaces Topic Paper (2025).
52. The Biodiversity and Green Spaces Topic Paper outlines the assessment criteria considered when designating Outdoor Sports Facilities. This states that Outdoor Sports Facilities must provide formal sports facilities, provide for a range of recreational activities, and that open sports fields can also contribute to the local environment and setting. Draft Policy BG/PO expands on this, and notes designated protected open spaces are publicly accessible.
53. Draft Policy BG/PO broadly outlines that development will not be permitted where they would harm the character of, or lead to the loss of, protected open space unless the existing open space can be satisfactorily replaced to an equivalent or better standard in terms of quality, quantity and accessibility.

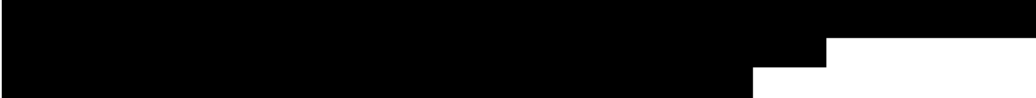
54. The Topic Paper is not nuanced enough to deal with the pitch for a professional football club. The pitch is not intrinsically valuable as open space and the opportunities it offers to the general public for sport are extremely limited. It has no real visual amenity value because it is enclosed within the stadium, and its ecological and biodiversity value is negligible.
55. Whilst we appreciate that allocating the pitch as open space might help prevent an unscrupulous owner seeking to redevelop the Abbey Stadium to leave the Club homeless, as noted above, the stadium is owned by the Club, and the stadium as an entity is protected by Policy WS/CF and paragraph 104 of the NPPF.
56. Therefore, including the Abbey Stadium's pitch as protected open space is not necessary and could make delivering improvements to the stadium more complicated.
57. If the Club to need to relocate, the pitch will be replaced elsewhere, and it is appropriate for the current pitch to be redeveloped for alternative uses, and not be safeguarded. It is crucial that redevelopment can secure the best and most effective use of land, in accordance with paragraph 124 of the NPPF.
58. For these reasons, the pitch at the Abbey Stadium should not be identified as Protected Open Space.

## **The Green Belt and Exception and Very Special Circumstances**

59. Given the development constraints in Cambridge, it is possible that if the Club has to relocate, the relocation site could be in the Green Belt. Both national and local planning policies confirm that built development in the Green Belt is generally inappropriate unless very special circumstances can be demonstrated (see paragraph 153 of the NPPF and draft Policy S/GB of the Draft Plan).
60. However, it should be recognised that the relocation of a football club to a viable Green Belt site can meet the tests for very special circumstances. This was recently confirmed by Cherwell District Council when the Planning Committee resolved to grant permission (subject to a s106 Agreement) for the development of a new stadium for Oxford United Football Club.
61. In the officer's report for the application (LPA ref: 24/00539/F), the following are given substantial weight as part of the case for very special circumstances existing:
  - The need to relocate;
  - Lack of alternative sites;
  - The importance of keeping the football club in the local area;
  - Community and socio-economic benefit that would accrue; and
  - English Football League requirements for stadia.
62. This demonstrates that the relocation of a football stadium, and the benefits associated with this for the local community, the economy, supporters and the Club itself can constitute very special circumstances. As such, the Council should ensure that there is sufficient policy support through the draft Plan (not just in relation to Green Belt) to ensure that the Club can continue to invest and grow; ensuring the long-term viability of the Club.

## **Overall Summary**

63. Cambridge United Football Club welcomes the opportunity to submit representations to the consultation for the draft GCLP Regulation 18 consultation. The Club will continue to play an active role in the wider discussion about the growth of the city recognising that the growth potential of Greater Cambridge requires an expansion of social, recreational and cultural facilities and services the community needs. We are proud to represent Cambridge as its professional football Club, ambitious to play a bigger role in the future of the city on and off the pitch and keen to remain at the heart of wider conversation about how we collectively maximise this generational moment of opportunity for Cambridge.

- 64. As outlined in this letter, the Club needs to expand and wishes to do this in Cambridge to ensure that the socio-economic and sporting benefits associated with the Club are shared with supporters and the local community. To do this, the Club need to increase their match-day capacity and improve the match day experience. This requires a larger stadium. Ideally this could happen at Cledara Abbey Stadium, but if as looks increasingly likely this is not possible, a new stadium site would need be found, ideally close to our current location.
- 65. The Club, therefore, is seeking a positive planning policy framework to support and facilitate the growth and redevelopment of a stadium, and a clear reference to the Council's support in principle for relocation if it is not viable to improve the Cledara Abbey Stadium. This will provide an appropriate planning policy background in the future.
- 66. We suggest that Policy S/AMC/AS: Abbey Stadium is amended as set out in **Appendix A** to this letter.
- 67. We look forward to working with the Council to ensure that a positive outcome can be secured for the Cledara Abbey Stadium, and the future of the Club.
- 68. 

Yours faithfully,


## Appendix A – Alternative wording of Policy S/AMC/AS

The following wording is proposed in relation to Policy S/AMC/AS, in line with the comments made in the covering letter.

### Policy S/AMC/AS: Abbey Stadium

1. ~~Development proposals within the Abbey Stadium area will be supported if they:~~ **The Council will support proposals to increase the match day capacity and non-match day use of the Abbey Stadium. The proposals should:**

- a) ~~Are part of~~ **Include** a comprehensive masterplan **and phasing plan** that will deliver a wider vision for Abbey Stadium. The vision should support an enhanced visitor experience, including how people travel to and from the stadium, the facilities within and around it and enhancing the sense of arrival to the stadium from Newmarket Road. Subsequent planning applications should support the delivery of the masterplan's vision;
- b) ~~Improve bus infrastructure on Newmarket Road where possible;~~ **[This matter is dealt with by criterion c) below]**
- c) ~~Resolve road network capacity;~~ **Address** movement and safety concerns on match days, ~~Site and improve the~~ access arrangements from Newmarket Road ~~require improvement;~~
- d) ~~Ensure new development is well connected to~~ **Seek to connect the stadium to the** existing footpaths and cycleways in the vicinity of the site, including the Chisholm Trail and that adequate, safe and secure cycle parking provision is set out across the site;
- e) **Encourage the use of sustainable means of transport to access the stadium, and** ~~Provide improved~~ **promote** active and public travel links to Cambridge City Centre, railway stations and Newmarket Park and Ride.
- f) **Seek to** retain existing trees to the western edge of the site and **seek to** provide additional planting; ~~to soften the impact on the Protected Open Space to the west of the site boundary and from views into the site;~~
- g) ~~Protect the sensitive ecological assets, Coldhams Common and Coldhams Brook, to the west and south of the site;~~ **[This matter is dealt with by other Plan policies]**
- h) ~~Provide a sustainable drainage strategy which includes consideration of the Flood Zones 2 and 3 are to the west of the site boundary;~~ **[This matter is dealt with by other Plan policies]**
- i) Identify opportunities to use the stadium and associated facilities on non-match days; and
- j) ~~Preserve or enhance~~ **Address the impact on** the setting of the Grade II Listed Buildings, 529 and Papermills, Newmarket Road and the Riverside Conservation Area which are opposite the development site. ~~and~~ An Historic Impact Assessment should be submitted with any **relevant** applications.

2. An urban design led approach should be taken to **make the best use of the site and** inform the appropriate scale and massing of development proposals, ~~minimising adverse~~ **addressing the**

impacts on adjacent residential properties and **nearby heritage assets** ~~open spaces~~. **[Unless the stadium extends physically onto existing protected open space, there will be no physical impact upon open spaces]**

**3. If the Abbey Stadium cannot be viably extended to secure Cambridge Utd FC's sustainable, long term future, the Council recognises that the Club will need to relocate elsewhere. In this scenario, the Council will work with the Club to identify and deliver a new stadium elsewhere. The Council recognises the importance of the Club's cultural and socio-economic role in Cambridge. The Council recognise that keeping the Club in the City is a very special circumstance that will be given significant weight in any planning decision.**

**4. If the Club is forced to relocate, the Abbey Stadium site is an important brownfield site that can come forward to meet the need for residential and/or commercial space. The Council will work with the Club to optimise the potential of this important brownfield site.**

# CAMBRIDGE UNITED FC