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South Cambridgeshire District Council
Call for Sites Consultation
Planning Policy Team
South Cambridgeshire District Council
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Dear Sir/ Madam,

Response to Call for Sites and Broad Locations

Submission by Grosvenor Britain & Ireland (Grosvenor) in relation to the Abbey Stadium home to Cambridge United Football Club, Newmarket Road, Cambridge

Grosvenor Britain & Ireland (Grosvenor) are responding to requests from both Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council to engage in the Call for Sites stage of the next Local Plan review.

Whilst it is the case that both Local Plans have recently been adopted by both Councils, it is clear that there is an early requirement for a review of those plans into a single development plan covering both administrative areas. In circumstances where it is the case that there is a recognition that both the urban area and the surrounding area around it operate effectively as one single planning area, then it is entirely appropriate that the emerging spatial planning policies of any new review should be contained within one single document. To that end we support the need for a review of the currently adopted two Local Plans and the submission of these representations should be seen in that context.

Both Councils will be aware of the proposals that have been the subject of wide consideration and discussion with stakeholders in respect of a number of strategies over many years to secure the future of Cambridge United Football Club (CUFC) and specifically to bring forward proposals for a new football stadium for the Club either on its existing site at Newmarket Road or at an alternative location.

A review of the Local Plan allows the Club to engage with the Council to bring forward a long term solution for the benefit of the Club, its supporters and the city as a whole.

Current location and character

The Abbey Stadium is located off and to the south of A1303 (Newmarket Road), immediately to the north-east of Cambridge Retail Park and Cambridge City Inner Ring Road.

The site has an area of 2.58 hectares. It is bounded by the A1134 Newmarket Road to the north, residential properties to the east, the City Council owned Whitehill Road allotments to the south and Coldham's Brook and Coldham's Common to the west.

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Abbey Stadium was reportedly built in 1923, with its first match being played in 1932. The current capacity of the Stadium is understood to be just over 8000 with just over 50% seated. It has four single tier stands; the North (Newmarket Road End) and West (Habbin) Stands being all terraced and the Main (East) and South Stands being all seated. The South Stand is understood to have been built in 2002 with the other three stands having been built in, or before, the 1960s. Accordingly, it is the case that all of the stands, with the exception of the South Stand which opened in 2002, have exceeded their useful life.

Between the North Terrace and Newmarket Road is a portacabin-type structure which houses the Club's ticket office and shop. To the west of this structure is an area of car parking capable of accommodating approximately 35 cars and an area of cycle racks (40 Sheffield Stands). The Cambridge United Supporters' Club (CUSC), which includes a bar and social space, is located at the northern end of the ground.

On the eastern side of the Stadium is an area of car parking, capable of accommodating approximately 122 cars. Vehicular access to this area of car parking is gained from Cut Throat Lane – an unmade track around 80 metres to the east of the main site entrance

The site also contains a single storey garage to the rear of 535 Newmarket Road.

The Club is currently in League 2 and has played in that League for several years– it was in the Conference League between 2005 and 2014.

The Club is supported well locally and is the largest single supported regular sporting fixture in the City during the season. In terms of average attendances in the season 2015-2016 the average attendance was 5274, in 2016-17 was 4723 and in 2017-2018 was 4523.

Regarding the wider site context, the site clearly falls with the built up area of the city with the site bordering the Whitehill Road allotments to the south of the site together with protected open space designation in the adopted Cambridge Local Plan. The site lies immediately north and to the east of Coldhams Brook and the wider area of Coldhams Common lies further south and west.

The most immediate built environment around the site is given over to residential development with some commercial properties on the street frontage.

The case for options for redevelopment/relocation

The Club has been actively looking at plans to relocate / redevelop without success for over a decade in the context of an ageing stadium, currently near the end of its life and which is not suitable for a club with ambitions to play at the current level, let alone to play in higher leagues. The current capacity is a little over 8,000 with standing on two sides.

The freehold of the site is mostly in the ownership of Grosvenor who acquired the stadium in 2010 and have been working jointly with the Club to assess the potential for either redeveloping the existing stadium or considering options to relocate the stadium to an alternative site.

The Supporters Club own the freehold of a part of the frontage, where the Supporters Club is sited and the City Council own the freehold upon which the away supporters stand sits.

The Football Club has a lease with Grosvenor for the stadium which has 36 years remaining and has been unable to make its full rental payments under the lease. It is critical that a long term solution for the Football Club is identified and in such a context the Supporters Club are continuing to cooperate in finding a solution to the redevelopment of the stadium.

Regarding the promotion for the redevelopment of the existing Abbey Stadium to provide for a new stadium facility alongside uses which can assist in paying for such proposals, it is the case that such an option must be viable, suitable, available and deliverable. The proposals to date have involved the proposed redevelopment

of the existing Abbey Stadium and the surrounding land to include a completely new stadium, 368 dwellings in a series of apartment buildings, ranging in height from four to eight storeys, and offices on the ground floor of one of the blocks of c 2,133 sqm GIA.

The 368 residential units are to be split into 74 no. studio apartments (20% of total), 166 no. 1 bedroom apartments (45%), and 128 no. 2 bedroom apartments (35%). The scheme also incorporates one commercial unit (affordable workspace) and a complete re-siting and redevelopment of Abbey Stadium.

In assessing the future of the site in design and layout terms, the perception is that the Stadium needs to be moved from west to east to accommodate reasonable vehicular access to the western part of the site from Newmarket Road (currently too narrow) given that the existing vehicular access via Cutthroat Lane is considered to be inadequate. In addition there are concerns about height issues onto Newmarket Road, particularly on account of the Listed buildings opposite.

The viability testing of the redevelopment scheme is thus based on the redevelopment of the stadium on the existing site with housing around two sides which funds the new stadium. An independent study has shown that in the instances where the figure of 40% of affordable housing would be applied by the Council as part of its potential Local Plan policy position then the development proposals for redevelopment are unviable. Even where 0% affordable provision is tested the scheme is marginal and would require additional funding to make it viable. Such viability work was carried out in conjunction with the Greater Cambridge Partnership and Cambridge City Council.

In such circumstances the Council would need to support a site specific case for redevelopment of the site which would enable a viable scheme being put forward and which would not necessarily meet the affordable housing figure being applied elsewhere in the Plan. In such a context the Council has the ability to draft a site specific policy and allocate the site for development and to set out the circumstances which it sees as relevant to a particular situation where there is the potential of reducing obligations on the site to ensure the redevelopment of the site and importantly to provide the long term security for the football club in this location. It is entirely appropriate for the Council to take such a policy stance should it decide to do so and we urge the Council to grasp this opportunity in the context of this Local Plan review.

Should the Council decide not to support such an approach the Club must consider other options and this should include the relocation of the football stadium to an alternative site. The effect of this approach is to consider new greenfield sites including land currently designated as Green Belt. In any major review of the Local Plans, it is entirely appropriate that the adoption of any development strategy to consider the location of future growth must involve a strategic review of both the inner edge and outer edge of the Green Belt. The future of the Football Club must therefore be seen in this context

In assessing the possibility of considering greenfield sites, there are a number of important factors that are relevant and which would be considered as beneficial from the planning perspective should such a strategy be pursued

In no order of priority these are identified as follows:

1. Moving the football stadium to an alternative location would result in making the current Abbey Stadium site available for new development which could include the provision of new housing and community infrastructure. The site constitutes previously developed land is located in a highly sustainable location within the City,
2. A new stadium in an alternative location could be designed to accommodate other uses – not only community sports facilities but also, e.g. a conference centre and concert space and thus have a wider community function
3. Dependant upon the new location, access to a new stadium could be much improved over the existing site and thus potentially easing congestion and improving air quality in the Newmarket Road environs.

4. The Club would not have to temporarily relocate from the Abbey Stadium in the circumstances that a new related site was coming forward (which would be the case with redeveloping the Abbey). A season away from playing at the Abbey Stadium would pose a significant financial risk to the Football Club.
5. A relocation site would ideally be nearby in order that the Football Club could remain in the Abbey/Barnwell area which would be beneficial for local employment, leisure and business and bring social benefits through the work of the Community Trust who would continue to focus the majority of their efforts on those areas of greatest need.
6. A new location would allow The Club to elevate their ambitions much further as a model community club through a genuine purpose built community facility, potentially open 24/7 all year round serving all sorts of different community needs. This presents an exciting opportunity to explore with the Councils and wider stakeholders exactly how that vision could be realised.
7. The stadium could be designed in a way to be able to grow with the progress of The Club.
8. The opportunity to secure a new greenfield site would mean a new start for the Club in masterplanning and layout terms and introduce the potential to create a modern 21st Century stadium with the necessary facilities alongside that befits the Club and the City as a whole.

Summary

Grosvenor and Cambridge United Football Club are making the necessary representations to the Call for Sites stage of the next Local Plan review in order to continue to address the long term future for the Club and the site upon which it sits. It has been the case that there has been significant dialogue and discussions about such options and these include the redevelopment of existing Abbey Stadium at Newmarket Road and/or the relocation of the Club to an alternative site. Both options are inextricably linked to continuing stakeholder engagement and the need to continue to engage with both local planning authorities.

The City Council has the ability to create site specific policy as part of any new Local Plan to allocate the existing Abbey Stadium site for redevelopment and at the same time acknowledge the clear benefits of securing the future of the Club whilst making a judgement about the appropriate level of obligations that should apply to that particular site e.g. affordable housing.

Both the City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council also need to consider the option where the football club moves out of its existing site on Newmarket Road to an alternative location and most likely to a greenfield site. The benefits of such a relocation are set out above and again, we consider that a review of the Local Plan provides the opportunity for such options to be explored and again we encourage Officers to engage with the Club and the project team as soon as possible to explore both of these matters.

In the meantime we would be very grateful if the authorities continue to keep us informed of Plan progress and should you have any queries concerning the above please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Garth Hanlon
Director