

1 August 2026

Dominic Bush
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Dear Dominic

26/02109: CHRIST'S COLLEGE LIBRARY

The College feel compelled to write to you following the Development Control Forum held on 29 July 2026 to respond to some misrepresentations made, re-state some issues which recur and to give more information on some points, largely in response to questions raised by [REDACTED]

These comments are made also in the light of two key points which came from CLAG's representation at the Forum. Firstly, that they do not object to a College library per se just that they object to this proposed library; and secondly that they now seem to accept that heritage 'harm' can be outweighed by the benefits of a scheme.

In addition, whatever the merits of the four points CLAG included in their application for Judicial Review, no one could now argue that all four were not comprehensively discussed during consideration of the second planning application. Counsellors can therefore take their decision hopefully without fear of a further Judicial Review request.

As the Master said at the end of the DCF, we want to correct [REDACTED] misrepresentation of the College's masterplan. This architects who drew up the document (MACE) suggested two possible sites for the library: the existing site in Bath Court or on the Hobson Street carpark. After extensive debate, Governing Body voted to rebuild on the existing site (with only one Fellow dissenting). The Fellowship want to maximise the use of the Bodley, also on Bath Court. The Grafton design helps bring that fine building back into use. No Fellow suggested building two libraries – why would the College saddle itself with the massive extra building costs and permanent organisational inefficiency of dividing the working library? Until [REDACTED] launched the idea yesterday, we are aware of only person (with an old connection to Christ's) who floated the idea.

Heritage Harm

Our position on heritage harm is clearly set out in our Heritage Assessment; we have assessed it properly and ours remains the only thorough and comprehensive analysis. We totally accept that others have their own views.

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However, we reiterate that many of those commenting focus on one aspect of the setting of the Bodley, giving this far too much 'weight' in the light of definitions in Historic England's setting guidance, do not properly assess other heritage impacts and so do not put these into the 'planning balance'. Whether this is done, as we have, by weighing all the heritage impacts and providing a 'residual' heritage assessment (we of course conclude that the scheme is overall beneficial), or whether one finds a specific level of harm but then considers the other heritage impacts (eg, the positive benefit of replacing a poor quality and out-of-keeping building with a high quality new one) as part of the public benefits is immaterial as long as this exercise is carried out thoroughly.

Historic England have said they have 'no objection' to the scheme on all three times they have been consulted. The fact that they recognise some harm arising from an aspect of the scheme does not invalidate their overall conclusion that they do not object.

We have given our opinion on the Victorian Society's partial assessment.

In terms of the Council's Conservation Officer, we reject the comment at the forum that his stance has 'hardened'. How can it? He is commenting on the same scheme as he did at the end of last year. He says he does not object to the proposals and indeed goes on to suggest various conditions. He then adds more detail by weighing the various heritage impacts.

However, if the Council's position is that overall there is some harm, then the level of harm must be given due weight and then balanced against the public benefits as required by Paragraph 215 of the NPPF.

Public Benefits

As I said at the meeting, public benefits are anything which delivers the economic, social and environmental objectives in Para 8 of the NPPF. Those opposing the scheme are quick to suggest that because some of these aren't apparent to those outside the College, they are private benefits. That cannot be the case.

Economic Benefits

Lots of unsubstantiated comment was made about how building the new library would impact the economic viability of shops on Christ's Lane. Frankly that is nonsense. If major chains such as Starbucks or Metro Bank decide to close branches, they will be strategic decisions made many miles from Cambridge. Most retail units the world over, have deep floorplates and do not rely on, or need, high levels of daylight. This is simply not a material planning issue and that appears to have consistently been the view of the Council's Environmental Health Officer.

Comments about light levels in the lane are equally unfounded. The spurious ratio assessment misses out one key factor, the height of buildings on the opposite side of the lane – in this case the existing building on the south side of the lane – which is taller and does block light etc. In any case, the implied criticism that we use examples of streets with vehicular traffic is unfounded on Rose Crescent or Laundress Lane or All Saints Passage etc. This is part of Cambridge's vernacular, and these intimate streets are often the most charming.

Sustaining educational facilities in Cambridge cannot be swatted away as a benefit solely to the College. The presence of the University and its Colleges is fundamental to the success of the City's, regional and national economy as evidenced by successive governments and their support for such things as East-West Rail. As the Master pointed out at the forum, this new library will serve the 700+ students of the library. Not just for one year but for potentially two centuries. That is a very clear social as well as economic benefit.

There will of course be an economic benefit also during the construction of the library with jobs, material and other supplies and spending in the local economy.

Social Benefits

The NPPF talks about supporting ‘strong, vibrant and healthy communities... by fostering well-designed beautiful and safe places with accessible services’. That certainly applies to a College community and what we are looking to achieve with the library project falling squarely in that definition.

The works being undertaken not only make the new library and the related social and dining facilities fully accessible for the first time, but because there will be level footplates created from the new to old buildings, this means that lifts etc can ensure access to parts of the College never previously accessible. This is a huge benefit for generations of students and sustains the uses of the historic parts of the College.

It should also be noted that the works also significantly enhance the safety of all using and visiting the library particularly fire safety and how people, especially those who are physically impaired, can safely exit the building.

Having talked about this benefit in terms of the College community it is also, in part at least, a benefit for the City community and to visitors. As the Master said, this is an open College, committed to allowing public access into Bath Court and a new exhibition room next to the Bodley at all times when the College is open. This will allow everyone to see the new building and also the attractive south wall of First Court and of course the east elevation of the Bodley with its bay window. In addition, outside undergraduate term time, groups including Cambridge schoolchildren will be allowed to visit the new library and the Bodley as part of pre-arranged groups.

To be clear, when the Master said the library is only used for half the year, he was referring to the undergraduate use as postgraduates use it at other times too. However wider access can be facilitated at these times as use is less. To keep the student community and staff safe, completely free access in these times is sadly not possible. Nevertheless, this will not just allow people to appreciate the new facilities but also the older parts of the buildings – and so they will be better able to understand the heritage significance of these buildings and spaces. A heritage and public benefit.

Environmental benefits

From the Forum, everyone seems to accept that the current façade of the library which faces Christ’s Lane is not a positive asset to the Lane or Conservation Area. It is our firm contention that replacing this with a high-quality building, designed by a leading architectural practice which gives better animation to the street is very clearly an environmental benefit.

Councillor Porrer commented yesterday about the detailing. The approach taken to this is explained in Grafton’s note to the Victorian Society. However, we remain open to a further discussion about this which could be covered by condition if considered appropriate.

Returning to Paragraph 8 of the NPPF, this talks about the protection and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environments. We are enhancing the biodiversity of the site, enhancing the built environment and, we say the historic environment too. The new building will be significantly more sustainable, use resources prudently and importantly (and as specifically mentioned in Para 8) will make effective use of the land which the College has available. These are all public benefits of the scheme and are covered in our Planning Statement.

Councillor Fisher made some comments about the sustainability credentials of the scheme. These have been set out in the supporting documentation submitted with the application and as endorsed by the Council’s Sustainability Officer. This also includes the ‘circular economy’ and reuse of materials from dismantled buildings.

Optimum Viable Use

Clearly, given the Judicial Review Ground, it is for the Council to explain its use of this term and the relevance to this project. However, we draw your attention to the comments in the Planning Practice Guide¹ which advises on optimum viable use and how it is used in planning decisions. This begins: 'The vast majority of heritage assets are in private hands. Thus, sustaining heritage assets in the long term often requires an incentive for their active conservation.'

Our view is that 'sustaining' heritage assets is not just about bringing redundant buildings into use, as has been implied by CLAG, but this must include maintaining, supporting and improving an existing use. That is precisely what the library project seeks to do as an integral facility of the College which needs to develop to meet modern requirements. Improved accessibility is not (as CLAG claim) a 'phantom benefit'; for the first time it makes the library fully inclusive. Whether 'optimum viable use' is used as a phrase or not, the importance of the library in sustaining the College as a leading educational establishment within ranges of historic buildings is clearly a heritage / environmental benefit as well as a social one.

We hope these observations are of assistance and look forward to seeing the Officer's report to Committee in due course.

Yours sincerely

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¹ 18a-015-20190723