

We write to offer a further contribution to the Castle Mill debate, which will come to Congregation next week. While we oppose the resolution, we recognise some of the concerns about the way the issue has been handled. However, we also feel that it is important that such concerns are based firmly on facts in order to serve the quality of debate and decision-making.

We have been alarmed therefore to read some of the claims being made, for example, about contamination at the site and the supposed risk to students. It is clear from published documents that full surveys and tests were completed *before* development began. A thorough decontamination scheme was agreed with the Environment Agency and carried out. The independent Environmental Statement, on which the Congregation resolution relies, confirms that the buildings are safe. Whilst we acknowledge that the University made a procedural error in not submitting the relevant documentation in a timely fashion, we would like to make clear that the University did not fail to do the necessary work at the appropriate time.

We are also concerned about claims that the planning consent would not have been given if it were not for shortcomings in the consultation process. Neither the independent Environmental Statement, nor the independent review of the planning process commissioned by the city council, offers any support for these claims. The latter report also makes clear that the University followed correct procedure. The best practice guidelines that it recommends form part of the report and do nothing to invalidate its conclusions. They have now been adopted and implemented, as recent initiatives for the Old Road Campus clearly demonstrate—initiatives that have been well-received and widely-praised.

We consider that a number of other claims being made underestimate certain aspects of the debate. It is understandable that supporters of the resolution should wish to underestimate both the financial and the human cost of the demand for partial demolition of the student housing at Castle Mill. Everyone accepts that the overall cost of £30 million for option 3 is an estimate. It is an estimate, once again, provided by independent external experts—not by supporters or opponents of the resolution. It is not the case that the city council has questioned the figure; nor has it asked for more information about the wider socio-economic aspects of the various options. It is possible that the final cost would be less but with the current increases in construction inflation, it could also be much more. What is clear beyond doubt is that it would be hugely expensive.

It would also, according to the Environmental Statement, be enormously disruptive for our students—with over three hundred students and their families being moved out for at least a year while the building work is carried out and an entire floor of mainly family housing being removed. To us, this is more than minimal ‘inconvenience’.

In our view, proper concern has to be shown for our students and their families. While we share with others the sense that the development could have been handled better, the University as a whole, and Congregation in particular, has to get it right now. And that means saying ‘no’ to the resolution.

Signatories to the flysheet:

Paul Goffin, Jesus  
Isobel Hughes, Estates Services  
Richard Jones, Estates Services  
Giles Kerr, Keble  
Jennifer Makkreel, Estates Services  
Sharon Mitchell, Estates Services  
Sean O'Brien, Estates Services  
C. A. Puddicombe, Estates Services  
S. L. Purbrick, Finance Division  
Paul Sullivan, University Security Services  
Michael Wigg, Estates Services