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### **RESIDENCES DEVELOPMENT – AVENUE CAMPUS**

Thank you for your presentation to the HRA Committee on 10<sup>th</sup> December. I promised to let you have a note of the main issues raised in the subsequent discussion (including in the Committee-only part of the meeting). As you will see, they are largely matters for clarification; HRA has yet to adopt a formal position.

There are two preliminary points.

First, there was concern about the shortness of time (to 20<sup>th</sup> December) in which local residents' views were being sought, especially given the time of year. It is of course appreciated that this is only the first stage in what is likely to be a prolonged process. Nevertheless, it would be helpful if there could be some flexibility in the University's timetable, bearing in mind the fact that even if all goes smoothly, there are unlikely to be any students actually in residence before September 2027.

Second, a number of critical comments were made about the information in the leaflet (and website) on which the consultation is being conducted, with some queries as to whether the information there is correct and even misleading. For instance, the leaflet (and website) indicates that the new building will sit below and behind a screen of existing

trees. However photos taken by a Committee member show that this is completely wrong. These photos were taken from the location of the windows of the proposed building looking south. It is clear from these that the building windows will actually be well above the treeline and will look down directly (and from quite close range) into the gardens, windows and rooms of many properties in the Oakmount Triangle. Another similar photo shows that there is no meaningful screening at all.

At the same time, the leaflet does not contain such information as the timescale for construction and completion, the actual height of the buildings, the height of the trees, the number of bed spaces (given on the website) or the breakdown in student numbers (UK or International, under- or postgraduate, etc, which is relevant to such things as car use). The leaflet does contain a comparison with existing buildings but it seems that the height of the existing buildings has been exaggerated so as to make the proposed new ones appear lower. This suggests that it might be worth someone again checking the range and veracity of the information being presented for consultation.

Turning to the substance, the Committee is aware of the original Development Guidelines for when the Avenue Campus was installed in the Tauntons Playing Fields. A copy of these was given to you at the meeting. In effect, they specify the conditions on which the installation was approved, conditions that are still relevant some thirty years on. For present purposes, the most pertinent are:

- ii. substantial landscaping including landscape buffers (15m wide) along the southern and eastern boundaries;*
- iii. preservation of overall parkland setting of the site;*
- v. a traffic impact study to assess the need for highway improvements ...*
- vi. limitations on the height of new development to 2 and 3 storeys;*
- vii. new development should complement the main building.*

Underlying these conditions is the recognition of, and emphasis upon, the ‘domestic scale’ of the surroundings, the maximum building height to be of 2 to 3 storeys, any new buildings to be close to the original buildings and to be placed in a parkland setting. Moreover, the purposes of the campus were to be the core academic ones of teaching and research, not student accommodation.

Against this background, the central question raised was whether what is now being put forward is not only not consistent with these conditions and the ‘vision’ that underlies them but fundamentally changes the character of the neighbourhood, and indeed the University site, and to the detriment of both. Indeed, rather than starting from an assessment of the character and constraints of the site, the proposals appear to be simply a reflection of a need to find 400-500 additional bed spaces for the University’s expansion by inserting conventional, generic accommodation blocks that could be located anywhere - and increasingly are, across the city - rather than in this rather special space.

Specific issues raised included the following.

1 The scale of the blocks both in relation to the rest of the campus and in relation to the surrounding properties, including Highfield Hall. The proposed buildings are very close to existing houses. As mentioned above, the occupants will be able to look directly into the houses and gardens of the surrounding houses. There is also the very significant issue of the additional noise likely to be associated with the new buildings and their occupants.

2 The two current Planning Applications for significant mature tree felling would result in the remaining screening being even less effective. Narrow belts of perimeter planting cannot hide 5-storey buildings.

3 The over-density of the development given that the campus is surrounded by (a) the Common and (b) 2-storey dwellings with pitched roofs, these together giving the campus a pleasant and distinctive ‘green’ setting. The green space acts as an appropriate buffer zone between the University and nearby residential roads.

4 The proximity of the development not only to the City’s largest and most valuable green space but also to the Oakmount Triangle Conservation Area, the Uplands Estate, Crofton Close and Heatherdene Road residential areas.

5 The likely additional pressures on Highfield Road and adjacent streets and walkways, including Lover’s Walk. Highfield Road is already close to being unusable during study periods from the numbers of people using it. Lover’s Walk is heavily used not only by pedestrians but also by cyclists, e-scooters, etc. Both Highfield Road and Lover’s Walk are at times unsafe and almost impassable for people with children and people with disabilities. It is not clear how much consideration has been given to this aspect of the proposals.

6 There is also concern about the possibility of increased staff and student parking in the Oakmount Triangle at and near the junction of Oakmount Avenue and Westbourne Crescent.

7 The fact that the accommodation will not be catered will increase the number of student journeys to fast-food and other outlets at various times of the day and evening including to and from the main University site. There is almost certain to be a substantial increase in the level of incoming and outgoing food delivery traffic, both morning and evening, with bikes, electric bikes, electric scooters and motorbikes all being used. These will all increase the risk of traffic and pedestrian safety issues,

noise at anti-social periods of the day and night into and out of the site, as well as confusion on and off the site caused by 'lost' delivery drivers.

8 Community cohesion. It is not clear what proportion of the students who will be accommodated in the blocks will also be studying at the campus. But there will definitely be a change to the community 'mix'. Highfield Hall, Wolfe House and shared houses mean that there are already both undergraduates and postgraduates living in the local community, but nothing like the numbers/proportion now envisaged.

9 The loss of the green space in front of the campus next to the car park which is particularly valued as a space to sit and relax.

10 The old Tauntons School building is attractive. The proposed buildings seem to have little architectural merit. Questions were also raised whether the building design encompasses solar and wind energy, given that the building should minimise non-renewable energy as well as use environmentally preferable products.

I hope this is helpful. Needless to say, we shall be very happy to discuss this further. In the meantime, copies go to our Ward Councillors and relevant Council officials as well as to other local residents' groups. A copy is also being placed on the HRA website.

RB

Professor Roger Brown  
HRA Chair