EIA Quality Mark
Case Study

### Key Issues –
In 2012, the University of Oxford obtained planning permission for the Castle Mill Phase Two graduate accommodation, without requiring EIA. However, the landscape/visual impacts of the development, particularly on views from historic Port Meadow to the city, proved controversial. A local campaign, and Judicial Review hearing, led the University to commission a voluntary and retrospective Environmental Statement, and to Oxford City Council agreeing to negotiate alterations to the development with the University. Nicholas Pearson Associates were commissioned to prepare the ES.

The retrospective ES (2014) assessed the effects of the existing development against a pre-development baseline, based on available information. For landscape and visual effects, this required use of previous photographs obtained from the project team and local community. The ES found that significant effects had occurred on landscape, visual amenity and heritage, and proposed mitigation options - changes to the design and scale of development - to inform future decisions.

### Purpose of the project
The University of Oxford has proposed changes to the design and colour of its existing Castle Mill Phase Two graduate accommodation development, together with additional planting, to reduce its landscape and visual impacts. The existing development did not originally require EIA and was completed and occupied in 2013. After the development attracted controversy, a ‘retrospective’ ES was submitted which led to design mitigation measures being proposed for the site.

### Description of the project
The existing Castle Mill Phase Two development provides 312 graduate accommodation units on former railway land, in the form of 8 main four-five storey blocks and other buildings. Following a Unilateral Undertaking by the University, and further consultations and design work, a new ‘Design Development’ planning application (2017) proposes to alter the design of the buildings and plant semi mature trees, to mitigate effects of the existing development.

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**Castle Mill Phase 2 Design Development**

The existing development, from Port Meadow in spring

The proposed design development (a visually verifiable montage)
Lessons learnt
The retrospective ES (2014) was an unusual case. It focused on the significant landscape/visual and heritage issues (the reasons for an ES being called for), but due to the highly sensitive nature and adversarial context of the case, it could not avoid reassessing and reporting other environmental impacts which had already been dealt with in the original planning application.

The retrospective ES identified design mitigation options through extensive use of Visually Verifiable Montages to assess their likely effectiveness in mitigating the key effects. The option to retain the scale of development was agreed with the Council and has been progressed through a new planning application, with a new ES (2017). The new ES assesses the effects of the design changes on the current baseline landscape, views and historic environment. The ES also assessed the interactions with the effects of the existing development, by reassessing the conclusions in the retrospective ES to confirm whether the findings of the retrospective ES on the effectiveness of the chosen mitigation option remained valid.

Lessons learnt cont.
- The Council’s original Screening Opinion (2011), stated that the development ‘gives rise to some impacts but these are not significant and can be addressed by appropriate mitigation’. The Screening Opinion should have referred to specific impacts and mitigation, to make the basis for its conclusions clear.

Landscape/visual and historic environmental effects should have been adequately assessed from the outset through the EIA process. The effects could have been mitigated through design more effectively than any post-construction mitigation scheme could deliver. As the Design Development mitigation was not planned from the start, its scope is now restricted by the site’s structural, geotechnical and space constraints. This case highlights the benefit of undertaking environmental assessments where significant effects are potentially involved.

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